The Worm in my Brain

Ember

Thank you
for supporting
My Daughter
and
I
... Selanon (age 33)
Izzy thy doter (age 11)

This is a Choose Your Own Adventure for Young Adults.

This book's genera's are Choose Your Own Adventure, Dystopian, and Young Adult.

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Everyone in this book is a work of fiction.

There is only one choice to be made.

So don't fuck it up

Trigger Warnings: (Ember):

Cursing

Violence

Drug use

Gore

Implied violence towards children

Nobody Knows Everything.

The first words are always the hardest. So, let's pretend this is an awesome opening.

Great. Good job. Moving on.

This story is set in the 10th dimension.

I am not qualified to teach about dimensions.

Realistically, I shouldn't be qualified to write a book either.

Yet here we are.

There is a **Lore** section and a **References** section at the end of the book.

First Dimension: A Line

Second Dimension: A plane, like a piece of paper with no height

Third Dimension: Where we live can be represented as a cube

Fourth Dimension: Time

Fifth and Sixth Dimensions: Possibility of alternate realities, but do not have access

Seventh and Eighth Dimensions: Have access to those alternate realities

Ninth Dimension: Can compare all timelines to each other

Tenth Dimension: "Everything is possible and anything imaginable is covered."

Chapter 1

Earth was renamed to Ma close to 1,000 years ago after the planet changed dramatically.

A thick, hot fog settled onto the surface bringing temperatures above 100 degrees.

This sudden change led to a mass exodus to other planets or moons, for any who could afford it.

As they left, they renamed the planet to remind themselves that it was no longer the home they remembered.

The name for the dying planet was chosen out of hope.

It was chosen for the words' original use.

Ma is not the empty room; Ma is the air that fills the room. Ma is the dust in the air. Ma is the sunlight that illuminates the dust.

Ma gives people time to breathe and process the story.

Ma allows space for life to be lived.

At first, the fog settled low, blanketing the water, filling the valleys and canyons.

As it settled onto the planet, humans mistook it for what they knew as ‘smog’.

It continued to grow, covering the surface in a thick layer of dark fog, leaving only the tips of the highest mountains exposed.

The fog rolled in with a potent toxicity that affected humans far worse than animals.

Humans immediately recognized their need to go up to survive, desperately building high into the sky as the gas masks and air filters quickly ran out.

The populations around the world gathered at their highest points, before gathering any and all resources they could find to rapidly build into the sky.

As they built, the fog continued to creep towards them.

Neighbors suffocated, children mutated.

The fog affected everyone differently, but no human who touched it remained unaffected.

Up and up, they would go, desperate to survive.

The cities quickly lost connection with each other as the previous civilization collapsed around them.

The population thinned as Towers collapsed, having been built on unstable and erratic foundations on top of mountains.

In the Tower, they choked in the low oxygen of the high atmosphere; they froze overnight.

Those who remained adapted quickly.

They found ways to survive with barely more than the plastic scraps and bottles brought with the construction crew's lunches, a thousand years ago.

The enforcers *used* to bring supplies from Mars.

They still do, technically.

In some ways, their plastic stood the test of time better than the Tower.

People in the Tower made up stories to make themselves feel better.

Some people struggled with the thought of being alone, others struggled with the idea of other people being out there, outside of the reach of their hoverboards, while still others embraced the uncertainty.

The common theme, though, was that people told themselves whatever they needed to hear to carry on, unaware that the Tower was the last reserve of humanity on Ma.

When Kalasutra Tower began, it was built on a mountain top, with the construction crew highly underqualified and quickly running out of resources.

Money disappeared, they created credits.

They began to pay workers exuberant wages to go down into the fog, equipped with a mask guaranteed for life.

Anyone who took this deal would get a mask for themselves and a mask for anyone in their family who could not work.

The worker was then sent down into the fog to forage, scavenge, or otherwise obtain the resources necessary to supply their mad rush upwards.

The masks worked against the unknown fog, but the workers weren't told that the filter would expire, nor were they provided replacement filters.

If someone were to ask for a replacement filter, they were told it was not necessary or did not exist.

While they were still building the 25th level, someone developed hoverboards.

Nobody is sure where they came from, but one day, the construction crew found a batch of hoverboards waiting for them at the base of the Tower, each made slightly differently, while still intuitive to use.

Each hoverboard had a small, low-detail cartoon turtle engraved on it.

The hoverboards' arrival made survival feel possible for those left on Ma.

Extra batteries were provided; each battery had folded solar panels attached to the sides.

The hover mechanism was inspected, researched, and added to various kinds of lifts, resulting in many hover-related things.

The higher they built, the

more crew they lost. The more crew they lost, the more janky the Tower became. The more janky the Tower became, the more people were inclined to call it "Jenga Tower" instead of its given name, Kalasutra.

The word 'Jenga' quickly became lost to time.

As they built, the city grew in layers. The first 100 layers were constructed with concrete and metal, the way humans used to build all their buildings.

Of the first 100 levels, the first 25 levels tried to use stairs before giving up.

Up to level 75, they tried to have walkways in and around the levels, but as they ran short on resources, they also gave up on those.

Every 5 levels of the first 100 levels, statues mark the level.

For the first 50 levels, there are two statues per level, on opposite corners of the Tower.

Starting at level 55 and above, there was only one statue per level.

The statues were projects added over time, as people adapted to living in the Tower and began to fear the night.

The statues extend from the corners of the level, sitting on ledges 3 meters long; the statues are 3 meters tall, mirroring the distance between them and the Tower.

The statues are representations of Gods and Goddesses of protection, each with a lantern, placed to 'Protect the citizens of Kalasutra and chase away the darkness'.

The lanterns they carry are solar powered, with the solar panels disguised around the base of each ledge.

Past level 100, they hit two problems. They ran out of resources, and the Tower couldn’t sustain the weight of heavier materials.

The following 50 levels over level 100 were built with pre-built units, such as shipping containers, to reduce the time the workers had to spend in the high atmosphere and limit the weight on the Tower.

Sometimes they cut holes in the containers that connected them to each other, but not always.

The next 50, or 50 is the best guess, were made from chicken wire mesh, sheets of aluminum, and any other scraps they could find.

They would weld, glue, solder, and do whatever they could to stick these pieces together to make some square footage that humans could use to exist at any point.

Nobody goes that high; even today, we struggle to breathe up there. We know they're there in theory, but few people have actually gone up there.

At its completion, Kalasutra Tower, Jenga Tower, or just ‘the Tower’, looked like a drunk toddler had used sticks, blocks, and rope to complete their Destination Imagination science fair project of "how high can I build this Tower on top of this bowling ball?”

The drunk science project was formed into an amalgamation of pointy edges, held together in places with something that resembled black rope.

The black rope appeared after the construction of the Tower was complete, and it wasn't placed by humans.

Kalasutra was named after the "Black Thread". [1]

This religious reference struck incredibly close to home for those who named it. So much so that they feared explaining its name or its reasoning to those who did not know it.

The most they could do was pray, survive, and hope to be wrong.

[1] " Kalasutra hell in Buddhism is an intense realm of suffering where beings endure relentless torture under iron plates and face dismemberment, coupled with continuous cycles of rebirth, similar to the experiences in Samjiva hell." (*Significance of Kalasutra Hell* 2025)

While the fog finished rolling in, and most of the humans finished moving on, thin black lines began appearing on the bodies of the remaining humans of Ma.

Sometimes they look like plain thin black lines, often intersecting. Other times, they look like dots or dashes; other times, they look like metal chains.

These lines appeared without warning, burning into their skin while they slept.

After the fog settled onto the planet, the storms began.

Thick, wet, and wild storms that began to reshape the face of the planet.

Rain that could change in size from one minute to the next, with drops ranging in size from a small ball to the size of a human head.

The thunder and lightning often plague the clouds below, easily seen from the Tower.

These wild and chaotic storms have long since lost their fear factor and have become a source of entertainment for the residents of the Tower.

While the thunder, lightning, rain, and winds can whip the Tower from side to side, often the residents have left the Tower in favor of dancing through the storm.

When the storms came, they pushed the fog further down than usual, allowing the humans more space in the sky to play.

Sometimes, the humans competed with each other in the storms.

These competitions offer a chance to refine skills, from seeing who can dodge the largest raindrops for the most amount of time, to seeing who can get across a distance the fastest without getting knocked off their hoverboard by the weather.

Additionally, the storms were a source of food.

As the storms increased in intensity, the animals living on the mountain below often took shelter in the Tower above the storms.

Storms would chase multiple meat options into the Tower, running from the storm or from the predators stalking them.

The most common creatures they can hunt are creatures that have come to them.

When hunting birds, they often fall off the Tower and out of reach.

However, some hunting pairs found that if they had another person waiting far below they could often catch the bird as they fell.

Some people still had pets, though the practice was uncommon, as it was another mouth to feed. Cats were common among those who had pets, as they survived in the Tower with a kind of ease.

Dogs were rare in the Tower. This is because, as you get higher and higher up in a building with little to no guardrails, a dog wouldn't be able to save itself from falling as easily as other animals.

Some common hunted animals are monkeys, squirrels, possums, geckos, birds, bunnies, raccoons, bats, snakes, and koalas.

Some predator animals that have found their way into the Tower are Leopard, Jaguar, Puma, Brown and Black bears, and alligators consistently make it onto lower levels. Many of these animals are hunted for food. For some reason, alligator meat is less likely to mutate.

Animals are not always immune to the fog. However, they were affected far less than humans, and their mutations could be difficult to spot.

There could be obvious signs of the mutation, such as extra eyes, legs, or something.

But other times, the animal could look normal, from hunting to butchering, and still affect those who consume it.

When someone eats animal meat that has been mutated, it can change them in all manner of ways.

Usually, it kills them. Leaving their body to be found twisted and contorted like a spider curled on its back.

However, rumors tell stories of people eating mutated meat, then being turned into creatures that sit and cry in the night, waiting for someone to help them.

When someone does show up, they devour them as their prey.

These stories are primarily used as lessons for children, when there were children.

The lesson was clear. Heroes don't exist.

***Nobody is coming to save you*.**

The humans on Ma have developed specific evolutions over the years of being subjected to the evolutionary pressures of the Tower.

First, they have adapted to living at extremely high levels in the atmosphere.

They also had to adapt to the extreme cold, living that high up. Thankfully, the heat of the fog made the cold manageable as they adapted.

1,000 years of evolutionary pressure and adaptation have developed skills in humans that remained behind on Ma.

Slowly changing, every generation took another biological step further from the enforcers sent there from Mars to live out whatever punishment the rest of humanity had deemed they deserved.

The enforcers were initially sent to keep peace and to provide the necessary resources for the people of the Tower to survive.

Then, Captain Kali [2] showed up, and slowly, the peaceful co-existence changed, twisted into pure extortion.

Then, there was the void.

The void came from the fog. Over time, people began melting into shadows.

[2] "In Hinduism, Kali is portrayed as a demon and the source of all evil." (*Kali (demon)*)

Void: A Drug / An Enemy

The experience of using void is said to be one of the most intoxicating and blissful experiences you can imagine, the equal of reaching Enlightenment in ½ of a second.

Users tend to giggle.

The withdrawal is where the euphoria fades, and you feel the acid eating you from the inside out, growing and multiplying within you. There is no cure when exposed to void. You begin to melt into the shadows until nothing is left.

Void creates its own drug. When blossoming, it hides in a corner and shoots out tendrils around the room. Inside these tendrils are 4-inch green orbs of the drug form of void.

Void can contaminate via osmosis.

The void is an acid, at its core, but it's covered with a membrane that is flammable and vulnerable to salt.

Cocoons can use tendrils to propel themselves and chase prey.

The enforcers should be the ones clearing out the void, but they have long since retreated to their office on level 25.

Several of the floors have rumors about them, including a rumor about floor 16, where a creature occupies the entire floor, eating anyone who dares venture there.

Rumor has it they still have running water, and somehow, electricity.

Nobody knows what they use it for.

The enforcers began exploiting the citizens of the Tower for the food, water, and medicine necessary to survive.

Then, they placed a bounty on the head of any child that could be collected and brought to them, or who could be proven to be dead.

A hero appeared after that order was given.

Tiny BadBitch appeared in the night, clearing out the whole 65th level and setting up a shop where she would supply all the Tower could need.

She began to sell water, medicines, and other supplies that people so desperately needed.

She cured and dried meats that nobody ever got sick from.

Somehow, even Captain Kali was wary of Tiny.

The enforcers of Ma are no more than thugs with high-power funding behind them, letting them do whatever they deem necessary.

Say the right words and they can justify putting an exuberant bounty for the head of any child.

Before that ‘job’ came through, there used to be jobs for children.

There were goats on the lower levels for milk. Kids raised kids until they could do more dangerous, and higher-paying jobs.

Now, there aren't kids anymore.

Except my kid.

And if anyone lays so much as a *finger* on my Ember? I'll ***burn*** this whole world to the ground.

Chapter 2

An angry teenager stands in an empty concrete room, his partners finally catching up behind him, pausing at the door.

He's screaming as he unloads his machine gun into a writhing mass of black void piled onto itself and hiding in the corner.

The void remains curled in on itself as the blows rain down upon it, before shooting tendrils forward, quickly snapping them shut over the teen as his scream turns from anger in confusion.

Silver and Buddy are already running from the doorway towards the exit, putting as much distance between themselves and the void while it remains momentarily occupied with consuming their former teammate.

As they run, Silver shouts at Buddy, angry, "WHO THE FUCK BRINGS A **MACHINE GUN** TO A CLEANING JOB?? *And where did he even get it? I want one.*"

Buddy is calmly jogging next to Silver's frantic, exhaustive dash, which is caused mainly by the fact that she consistently carries too much, with endless bits and bobbles shoved into her oversized duffel.

Buddy had once asked her why she needed such a large duffel when he had been trying to get her to use a smaller one, her response was 'But this one is large enough to fit a dismembered body…' Followed by a shrug.

He calmly responds, "He was your pick, not mine."

They run through a concrete level of the Tower, which is empty in the middle, save for some support pillars. Levels in this section have rooms lining the perimeter with an otherwise open center.

However, some rooms around the edges have been walled off due to decay or damage.

They manage to get about a third of the level between them and the void before they hear it crashing after them.

Buddy barely glances over his shoulder in acknowledgment, while Silver does a full spin-step mid-run to see if it came out of the room yet, or how close it is? Because it definitely sounded like it did.

As Silver turned back to the path she was running on, there was a loud BANG from behind them, followed by a succession of cracking and metal groaning as the floor beneath them began to give way.

A large crack splits down the middle of the level, crumbling into rubble held together by rebar.

"Oh *SHIT!!!"* Silver yells, trying to get out of the crack, worried about falling into the level below.

This was *way* more than the small shadow puddle they had seen their co-worker firing at; the sheer amount of void they must be facing for it to be able to cause this much structural damage was gut-wrenching to Silver.

Her everything clenches, and she kicks her running into high gear.

Buddy runs next to Silver inside the large crack, hopping from piece to piece of rubble. He reaches for his hoverboard before deciding against it. With as much as Silver carries, she's faster on foot right now.

Her board has a mod, but it's a one-time use that's more of a last resort.

He held off on calling the shot so they could get on the boards until the situation got more desperate.

He follows Silver's lead as she hops, slips, and claws herself out of the crack.

Back on solid ground, Silver manages to put even more energy into her chaotic running, Buddy simply

switches from jogging to running, his gate smooth as ever.

The duo continued to run along the sides of the crack, trying not to get too close to it, but needing to travel the same path to reach the only exit to the level.

Silver's eyes remained locked on the blinding light flowing in from outside.

The floor around them continues to crack, crumple, twist, and groan as they relentlessly push for the exit.

They cross the two-thirds mark through the level towards the exit, and the floor gives a final crack and opens. The hole in the floor opens 4 meters further to either side of the crack.

Feeling the floor crumble beneath them once more, then begin to fall, the two try to jump to safety, aiming for the right side of the level.

Buddy launches himself into the air, easily clearing a 6-meter jump (nearly a 20-foot jump) diagonally.

As he lands, he turns to look for Silver and doesn't find her.

Looking into the gap, he sees she landed in the level below.

Without hesitation, he drops into the level with Silver.

"Did you even try to jump? Or did you only make it 3 meters." He teases as he quickly pulls her up off the floor, pulling her elbow up and towards him as he tries to pull them towards the exit of the lower level.

"***Shut*** the fuck up. Shit, 3 meters is being very generous for that jump." She grumbles as she rubs her ass while stumbling forward as Buddy pulls her up, immediately stepping on something as she stands up.

That 'something' yelps loudly under her foot, causing her to let out a yip of her own and fall back down.

Buddy catches her as she

falls, pulling her close.

She looks down to examine what she stepped on while Buddy pulls her towards the level exit; they need to run.

Fuck whatever she stepped on, *we need to* ***go.***

He looked up at the ceiling in panic.

What he saw caused him to pause, confused.

The crack in the ceiling was filled entirely with void, but… it wasn't coming down?

Why wasn't it coming down…?

Why…? What.

What was happening right now.

He crosses his eyebrows as he stares up at it.

Tendrils of void were pushing slightly into the crack, but they appeared to be repelled by something.

Why did it look like… a barrier?

…the hell?

He and Silver had been working, mainly on these same levels, fighting against this same void creature for more than half their lives.

He had *never* seen it do this before.

He looks back at Silver, confused.

"What the fuck-" he says, pointing at the ceiling as he looks at her.

His finger curls limply as he sees her, and he immediately forgetting about the void. "-**What the fuck? Bro**, *bro,* it needs to *breathe*, what are you doing. **Really?** Really right now? Are you serious? What is your plan."

He puts his hands on his hips, elbows out, his arms akimbo as he begins to lecture her. "Are you planning to eat that or keep that? You *know* the minute Ember sees that thing, she isn't going to let you do anything but keep that *forever."*

He pauses, then smiles, his nerves forgotten in his confusion, “Or should I say ‘Fur-ever?’” He laughs as she punches him, finishing zipping up her duffel and moving towards the exit of this level, starting to jog towards it.

“I don’t know,” she shrugs, “but I can’t *leave* it here. Plus, I can’t *hold* it until we get to the shelter; I need my hands free. And what if it pees on me? Ugh. Besides, there’s plenty of air in my duffel.”

Buddy starts jogging alongside Silver, reaching out to place his hand on the bend of her elbow, this time to slow her as they move towards the exit.

She turned to look at his hand, then at him, finding him pointing wordlessly at the ceiling.

Silver looked up at the void filling the crack above them, feeling her stomach turn cold as she took in the scene above them.

After her initial panic begins to fade, she becomes curious.

What? Why…

Silver shifts her weight from one side to the other, watching the tendrils shift in response to her movement.

It was still hunting them, but something was keeping it out of this level.

“Um… Okayyy.” She responds, crossing her eyebrows and pressing her lips together in a tight line. “Well…” She says thoughtfully, turning to Buddy.

“Since we seem to be good… for whatever reason…? Do youuu wanna check if it has family around here? Maybe we’ll be able to find the mom, and I won't have to worry about feeding it all the damn time.” Silver asks, shrugging.

“That sounds good. Plus, maybe we’ll find the secret repellent while we look… be

nice to be able to keep it out of your shelter…" He responds, saying the last part to himself.

The two are increasingly uncomfortable as the void follows them in the open crack above as they walk around.

They clear the rest of the level and find no other signs of life, nor do they find anything out of place that appeared to be repelling the void.

Declaring the puppy an orphan, they begin to devise an exit strategy.

While the void didn't seem to be able to come onto this level, it seemed to have worked out an alternative to be able to still get its meal.

The void had left what looked like a thin layer of itself in the crack, keeping them on their level.

It had also gathered more of itself around the only entrance/exit to the level.

Silver watched the void dripping itself from the top of the doorway, connecting to more of itself along the bottom of the exit, and beginning to form a thin, gappy net around the entrance.

That meant they would have to exit on their boards at high speed and do a great deal of dodging while they did.

Hopping on their boards, they do a few laps around the level to gain speed and confuse the void following them in the crack above. They rush the exit, dodging the void that was attempting to lay a rudimentary trap for them.

As they flew out of the level, Buddy looked behind them and saw that the void had finished sealing the entrance of level 84, as well as sealing a large portion of the entrance of level 83 that they had fallen down into.

They might've gotten dripped on…

Taking in the destruction behind them, he saw the crack had split the level in

half, crumbling the walls.

The walls were broken into chunks, some leaning away from the tower dangerously far from the Tower, threatening to fall.

The chunks opened holes in the walls that were easily two to three times the size of the average human.

‘Shit, they probably could have left through one of the holes in the walls… might’ve been safer?’ Buddy thinks to himself before turning his attention forward and flying down to the enforcer’s office.

A few minutes later, they arrived outside the enforcers' office on level 25, just above the fog.

They check each other for damage or drops, then head into the office to give the report.

Upon entering the office, they signed in with the clerk at the front, a new girl wearing a rebreather.

The new ones always wore rebreathers everywhere they went. It took them an average of 6 months to quit being paranoid about everything.

Although even among the citizens of the Tower, how much fog you could breathe before suffering the effects was heavily debated and had no clear answer.

As the new enforcer walked them back to the Captain's waiting room, she stared at Silver's bag in horror, as it wiggled and began emitting muffled barks.

Silver smiled, happy to give some introductory trauma to the new girl, and said, "Thought I'd pick up dinner while I was out." Patting the outside of her duffel as she walked past the enforcer, taking a seat in the Captain's waiting area.

The new enforcer turned visibly green and ran into the back, pulling her rebreather off as she ran.

Silver turned to Buddy, determined to make conversation over the harsh buzzing of the lights in the ceiling, "You really think they have running water here?"

Buddy made a face, thinking, "I mean, we are pretty low. I guess it wouldn't be *impossible*. But where would it draw from? Who would clean the water? Who would maintain the system that brought it here? It doesn't make sense."

Shortly after the new girl rounds the corner, the Captain comes into his waiting room, his eyes glued

to his clipboard. “Sylvia, Adam. With me.”

Both Silver and Buddy visibly cringe after hearing their legal names called out loud, then get up to follow the Captain.

Silver and Buddy enter the Captain’s office and line up on the back wall. Buddy stays back while Silver steps forward to give the report, as usual.

“At 1300 hours, our team of 3 men joined at their meeting position on the 75th floor. This assignment was to assess the 80th to 90th floors. When finished, we were to report back any voids we found, as well as the sizes, and approximate contamination zones based on the levels they occupied and the volume of each level that was occupied.

“We were ordered to be cautious, undetected, and to proceed with stealth. This was a recon mission only.

“This information was conveyed to all members of the party:

- At the time of accepting the position by Sylvia and Adam
- During the hiring process for the third member of the team
- At the meeting site at 1300

“At approximately 1342, on level 81, our third man, a man picked up the night before during Employment Hours at the Recruitment Zone, split from our team, yelling “SCREW THIS” and proceeded to run, loudly, up and around the levels.

“We found this team member on level 84, unloading a Machine Gun into an *extremely large*, some would say *concerningly* large, nest of void. The void ate him, and we fled.

“The void pursued us, and in its pursuit, it split the floor of the level we were on.

“Speculation is that many levels between 80 and 85

may have suffered structural damage due to today's events.

“We assume the size of the nest to be large enough to fill at least one level, to its brim.

“We assume the nest size to be true because of the ease with which it could cause damage during the event today.”

Silver finished her report, standing at attention, stiff as a board, staring at the wall behind the Captain.

The Captain had his glasses off and was rubbing his only eye, occasionally rubbing around his eyepatch. “What was his name?” he asked, tiredly, picking up his glasses off the desk and returning them to his face.

Silver glanced towards her shoulder but didn’t dare look back.

They had no idea.

They had asked each other this very question on the way over, knowing they would need it for the report, or at least need an explanation as to why they didn’t know it.

Silver swallowed hard and tried to answer. “We met this third member last night. At the Recruitment Zone, during Employment Hours. If you ask there, anyone can confirm our story.”

The Captain began rubbing his temples. “He cost himself his life, supposedly, *conveniently*. Not only will I get reprimanded for that, but now I am *obligated* to investigate your wild claims. I have to do a Damage Report, an Incident Report, and an Out of Orders report, as **you two** didn’t report adding him to your crew before beginning your mission.” He glared up at them, “And now? Now, levels 80-85 have been reported *to my ears* to contain structural damage that I have to deal with. Which will be *another* report, a follow-up investigation, and **if proven true**, the clean-up will also fall on my desk.” The

Captain puts his glasses back on and glares at her. “All because of ***you.***”

Silver continues to stand at attention, glaring at the wall behind him. “*Sir*. A nest of void that is large enough to break a whole level in half while still pursuing us? That’s a ***wee*** bit scarier, dontcha think?”

The Captain crosses his eyebrows and lets out a breath. “You certainly do get *creative* with these **problems**, ***don’t you***, Sylvia. Out. Now. Both of you.”

Silver stabs her hand at the Captain, palm up, hand open.

“You two are such a headache. Be aware, you will be expected to find a third person to stay compliant; otherwise, who’s to say you two aren’t filing false reports, or wasting my time by forcing us to investigate every damage claim you make?” The Captain says, his voice cold.

He then drops the reward into Silver’s outstretched hand, which is 1/10th the size it should be. “This is the remainder of your paycheck, after the fines for the incident investigation, of course. Carol, at the front, will be paying you from here out.”

Buddy and Silver leave the office.

Standing in front of the closed doors of the office, Buddy asks, “What do you think happened to the people who used to live on those levels? The ones the void is now… occupying? Do you think they got out in time… or…” Asks Buddy. “I mean… There haven’t been people there in a long while, but… that used to be the quiet part of the Tower, problems didn’t use to happen around there… not until… what, 4 years ago? 5? It’s hard to remember…” He trailed off as he spoke.

Silver is quiet for a moment, partially listening. Then she turns to Buddy, puts the full

reward in his hands, and pushes his hands into his chest with more force than necessary.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve vetted the guy more. Hell, I didn’t even get his name. This isn’t on you; this is on me. I’ll pay you back, and you’ll get your full 1/3 for surviving today. God only knows what I would do without you.” Says Silver, looking incredibly ashamed of herself.

Shame turns to anger.

Silver scowls at Buddy and jabs him in the shoulder with her finger. “But next time, *this* time, finding the 3rd is **your** job!” She turns away from him and crosses her arms, looking down. “I’m sick of owing you.”

Anger turns to sadness.

Buddy watches the emotions pass on Silver's face, one after another.

He smiles softly, takes both of her hands, and cups them, placing the credits in them.

“You don’t owe me anything. Never have, never will. Take this, you’ll need something to bargain with at Tiny’s when you figure out that Em will never let you eat an animal as small or cute as a puppy. The next problem becomes: what will you be feeding it?” Buddy makes a jokingly thoughtful face, “What number is that? Problem… two?”

Silver laughs, despite herself, “Problem one million and one.” Her mood darkens. She looks over the edge. “Although…”

Buddy looks over the edge, too. Then he looks at her seriously. She would never hurt an animal; hell, that was why Ember had to take over hunting.

He was only joking about them eating it; neither of the girls would have the heart to eat a baby anything. “What are you gonna do, jump?” Buddy teases, “You couldn’t make it more than 3 meters.”

They went their separate ways, Silver heading back to her and Ember's shelter.

There was a main room at their place, and then off to one side, there was a concrete counter that stood alone, dividing the room unevenly.

Beyond that divider, there was more concrete countertop against the wall, with small shelves above it.

They had chosen one of the units that had actually been made to shelter humans, although Silver had fought to obtain it, and they routinely had to fight to keep it.

The counterspace was all Ember's; she used every inch as her workshop.

Their shelter had some small rooms stemming from the main room, mainly for storage, and even Buddy didn't know what was in all of them.

Silver and Em have many large buckets and bins.

Some were filled with water and placed in the sinks near the workbench. The water in those was routinely swapped out as one of Ember's chores.

Some of the bins are filled with parts used for cleaning weapons.

Still others were filled with random assortments of necessary items.

There are bins stored in the washroom for bathing, laundry, and the like. This was only possible because of Ember's intricate system for collecting rainwater.

Thanks to her, they always have enough for themselves and some to sell.

As soon as Silver made it in the entryway of the level 50 concrete shelter she shared with Ember, she was caught in a surprise attack.

Ember had been hiding inside the entryway, crouched so she would hopefully not be seen, and once Silver was fully inside, she pounced.

"***Jesus***, bugaboo, you scared the shit out of me, what the hell is wrong with you?" Silver exclaims, laughing and hugging her child after catching her midair.

Ember, who had been laughing at first during the embrace, stopped quickly, stepped back, and stared intently at Silver's duffel.

"Sooo. I kinda had a bit of a *day* today." Silver starts. Well aware Ember isn't hearing a word. "One of my partners thought a *machine gun* would be a good weapon to bring on a cleaning job. A ***machine gun,*** of all things."

"Your duffel is moving." Ember hadn't blinked. She is locked in on the duffel with an intensity that makes Silver chuckle.

"Yah, kiddo. I got us dinner." Silver says with a wry smile.

Em breaks eye contact with the duffel to shoot Silver a glare of disbelief.

Dinner came into the shelter dead, the meat processed.

This was alive and *moving*.

Silver laughs. "Yeah… I… Uh… I kinda stepped on this little guy. I was worried I might've hurt 'em. Wanna take a look? See what you can do?" Silver pulls the puppy out of the duffel bag.

Ember immediately melts, fawning.

"OHMYGAWD-ITSAPUPPPY-OMYGAWD-CANWEKEEPIT-IMEANOFCOURSEWE'REKEEPINGIT-WEHAVETOKEEPIT-OHMYGAWD-OMG-OMG-OMG-OMG-WEHAVETOKEEPIT-*ILOVEHIMSOMUCH!!!* Your name is Isaac! Say hi, Isaac!! I love you, Isaac!!" Em is

absolutely gushing so much love and affection on the new puppy, Silver worried he'd drown in it.

"Bark Bark!" Isaac (apparently) replies.

"See, he loves his name!" Em and Isaac immediately drop to the floor and begin to play. Em chases Isaac around and tries to give him kisses, but he yips at her and runs just out of her reach.

They then begin playing with everything they are definitely not supposed to be playing with.

Em hugs Isaac and breathes in his fur, "Stay with me fur-ever, Isaac." Silver groans at the joke, wondering why Buddy and Ember so often shared a wavelength.

Silver, Ember, and now Isaac live in a concrete room on the 50th floor that, just like every other concrete room on the Tower, was never built with a door.

Occasionally, Buddy comes over, sometimes staying for the night.

Their beds are made of vines weaving together old plastic bottles.

It was Ember's idea, as air heats up faster than concrete.

The beds do a decent job at keeping them warm through the night at the high altitude.

They are also mostly flame-retardant, which is useful because they burn a fire to block the door each night.

There is an extra bed for Buddy, but he never uses it. Instead, he sleeps sitting up against the back wall, facing the doorway.

Silver often wonders if he sleeps lying down wherever he goes when he doesn't sleep at their shelter.

While Em and Isaac play, Silver gathers vines from the 'dry vine' rack that Ember had cut and organized.

There were three racks: a

‘wet vine’ rack, a ‘maybe’ middle rack, and a ‘dry vine’ rack.

She began to build the pieces together for a fire to set at the entryway. Void was weak to fire, light, and salt, which meant heat and light from the doorway fire were good deterrents.

Everyone seemed to use different methods to keep it away; this was theirs.

Silver finished gathering things for the fire, but didn’t light it yet, as they were still awake.

She began putting things from her duffel away, charging what needed to be charged from their solar-powered batteries. Things she gathered while cleaning the levels that used to house people.

She swapped the battery in her board for a fresh one and stashed it back in her duffel.

She was bound to forget it if it wasn’t already in her duffel.

She had found extra nutrition bricks today in the upper levels, left behind by people who weren’t as lucky as they had been today.

She opened one of their bins, grabbing a fresh water bottle for her bag.

Ember had a massive network of water collection areas *all over* the Tower.

Somehow, they never ran dry, even without rain.

Her mind began to wander.

It was weird that Buddy didn’t come back with her to their shelter today. He usually comes back with her after cleaning jobs.

It started as a way to clean their weapons more efficiently and talk about better game plans for how to handle fight scenarios like the ones they had just encountered.

But over time, Ember had… okay, and *she* had come to rely on the consistency of knowing they were both safe

because they both came back.

They always came back.

She didn't seem to notice his absence today, though, with Isaac and all. But Silver began to worry she would ask, because she didn't have an answer.

And just like that, Ember plopped down next to her and asked, "So where's Buddy? You guys get in a fight or something?"

Cold grips Silver's stomach and shoots into her veins.

Was that a fight?

She didn't know what to make of Buddy; he was always so closed off. So hard to read. Was he mad at her?

This thought struck deep into Silver's gut.

She needed him.

Hell if she would ever tell him, but he was her balance. Her light.

The calm to her chaos.

Silver sputtered at first, frantically searching for a response.

She tried to recover quickly, very aware Em was watching her.

She turned to Em and made a face. One eyebrow slightly arched, wearing a sarcastic smile, chin shoved forward. "Yaahh, we got in a fight. A *big* one, I told him I was gonna *eat* Isaac, and he told me to go eat void instead." Silver pokes Em in the forehead, pushing her head back softly.

"*Eeewwww grosss*. You guys are nasty." Ember considers what Silver had said.

She responds thoughtfully, shaking her head, "You'd never eat a puppy."

She shrugs and gets back up to go play with Isaac some more, saying over her shoulder, "It was probably just a lover's quarrel. You guys will get over it." She waves her hand over her shoulder and gets back on

the floor to play with Isaac.

Silver gets up, acting menacing and playful, grabs one of the few soft things in the room, one of the pillows, and immediately begins to punctuate her sentence by whapping Ember with it. "WE." Whap. "ARE." Whap. "*NOT*." Whap. "**LOVERS**!!" Whap Whap Whap Whap Whap Whap.

Ember is laughing harder than normal, "Sure sure, you're silver and I'm gold, listen close, and let the truth be told." She sticks her tongue out at Silver as she loosely quotes Silver's standard opening to her improv stories.

And proceeds to laugh as Silver screams with fake rage while whapping Ember with the pillow until Ember gets the hiccups from laughing too hard.

Silver and Ember keep checking the doorway as they settle for the night. Nothing more than a quick, darting glance every minute or two. Their timing is in synch.

A minute would pass, Ember glanced at the doorway, then at Silver. The next minute would pass, and Silver glanced at the doorway, then at Ember.

Their dance continues until the nutrition bricks are laid out, cured meat is unwrapped from storage, and cut up for Isaac. Silver's weapon is cleaned and refilled. Ember goes through her reading assignment in her book.

Ember hates her reading assignments. She never met another human who had to do them, but Silver makes her do them for some reason.

It's been about four years since she moved in with Silver, about 5 years since being a kid in the Tower was safe.

Not that she had ever felt 'safe' before living with Silver.

While doing their chores, they are chatting, mostly about Isaac.

Isaac is a puppy. They knew very little about puppies, as dogs of any kind were incredibly rare in the Tower.

Having little to no railings on the Tower, creatures without hoverboards essentially glued to them or the ability to fly on their own generally didn't survive long here.

Especially once you get to the higher levels where they had found him.

Though Markie claimed he had a cat that he says has fallen off the Tower more than *15 times*, it still somehow always shows back up a few days later.

Realistically, cats *have* shown back up after falling before, but 15 times?

Silver was beginning to wonder if there was a... reason to that.

Isaac was about 15 pounds and about one foot tall (6.8 kg and 30 cm) from the floor to his back while he stood.

He had a thick, black coat, accented with spots of light brown scattered around, making a weirdly symmetrical pattern, as though someone had painted him with makeup.

Silver kept rubbing at the fur on his face to make sure that makeup was not, in fact, on him. Those light brown eyebrows were too cute to accept as natural.

From the bottom up, it looked like someone dipped his tips in light brown; the bottom half of all 4 of his legs were all light brown, but his tail was black, thick, and full.

He had a light brown dot on his chest right above where his front legs connected on both front legs. His mouth looked like he had bitten something that squished out light brown all over his neck, painting on a forever smile.

It even splashed onto his eyebrows a little, giving him

one dot above each eye that Silver kept rubbing at. His ears were big, floppy, and furry. They kept flopping over when Isaac tilted his head. Em was trying to get them to both stand straight up, but at least one was flopped over at a time.

"You know, back in the old days, there used to be a lot of different kinds of dogs." Silver mused.

Ember had been lying on her back, holding Isaac above her and cooing at him. "Oh, really? What were they called?"

Silver stopped "Uuuhhhhhhhh... Let me think... Great Dane... Laboratory... Shit Zoo... Puddle... Oh! Pitbull. That was one. Shepard? Yeah, that was one, German Shepard. I think? Then... also... I think there was one called a Pointer?"

Ember put Isaac down in her lap and skeptically narrowed her eyes at Silver. "A Pointer? Like your finger? Like how you're pulling mine right now?"

Silver laughed and shook her head. "No, I'm serious! It would, like, you know, point at things."

Ember stared at Silver sideways. Not believing her. "Show me."

Fuck. Silver rolled her eyes while they were closed. "Oh-kay."

Silver got on all fours, went sideways in front of Em, and pointed at something in front of Em with her nose and leaned in with her body.

Ember couldn't stop giggling.

Sitting back, Silver grabbed a nearby object and threw it at her. "You suck. You know that? You knew what I meant." Silver crawled over back to where Ember was lying with Isaac.

Ember, still giggling, replied, "Yeah... but the visual helped."

Silver looks at Isaac, lying in Em's lap, panting happily. She considered him for a moment, then said, "Well. Whatever you are, I'm sure you'll learn to earn your keep."

Standing up, she says, "Don't forget, you need to find a way to start feeding him. Your pet, your responsibility. Starting tomorrow, he gets breakfast out of our savings, then no more. I look forward to hearing what you come up with for his meal plan."

"I think I'll talk to Tiny and see if we can work out a deal. She likes me, after all." Ember speculates, lying back once more, picking Isaac up. She holds him above her, arms fully extended, elbows locked. She turns him left, then right, and he runs and wiggles in the air, tail wagging, eager to break free and chew something.

"She does like you. Hates damn near everyone in this place, but she has a soft spot for you, that's for sure. Dinner in 5." Silver says as she gets up and starts shifting tasks.

Silver lights the dried vines at the concrete doorway of the concrete hallway of the concrete building, and the night has officially begun.

They can relax.

Hopefully, the fire would last until morning.

Once they're sitting down for dinner, Silver takes her nutrition brick, shoves the whole lego-sized brick in her mouth at once, crunches powerfully, somehow not breaking any teeth, and sighs.

Ember looks at her, horrified. "Did... you want mine, too?" she holds out her green nutrition brick to Silver.

Silver isn't looking at Em; she doesn't open her eyes. She considered these blocks to be less desirable than compacted bucket waste.

She desperately tries to maintain composure through

the horrid smells, tastes, and moderate pain she just put herself through as she pulls out another book and shows it to Ember.

Em grumbles and looks away. Where the hell does she keep getting these things?

Silver hears Ember grumble, opens her eyes, and smiles. “You’re gonna like this one, Bug. I found it a while back and was saving it. It teaches you how to train things.”

This catches Ember’s attention. “Like Isaac? Or… like *what* things?”

Silver smiles, “Anything with a brain can be trained with this. It’s from the old, old, *old* days. Probably before that, even, really.” She said, her face considering.

She continued, “It’s called ‘Behavioralism’, and it’s by a guy called Pavlov. He got famous for training dogs.”

Ember’s eyes light up like bonfires, fixated on the book.

“Can I… read it?” she asks, softly.

“Tell you what, bugaboo, I’ll read you the first chapter tonight and help you get a handle on the way they talk in this book, because it’s weird, and it ain’t easy. Then, when you think you’re ready, you go on and take it. Okay?” Silver says, smiling.

Together, they each think about how Ember will be taking the book first thing in the morning.

Silver laughs, seeing the intensity in Ember’s face, and takes that as validation.

Em hunkers her shoulders down and looks away, not sure why Silver is laughing.

“Okay. Can we read it now?” Em asks, not making eye contact.

“Sure, it’ll give you something to think about instead of that nasty ass brick you’re about to chew on.” Silver teases.

Ember begins dunking the brick in her cup of water, like

a chocolate chip cookie into milk, which they occasionally got as a reward when the enforcers needed something specific.

Silver visibly cringes, watching her dunk it repeatedly, as though it were something desirable, rather than repulsive.

“Oh, god, how the hell do you do that. That makes it go from tasting like cardboard to tasting like moldy *rotten* cardboard, ugh.” Silver shivers and gags.

Ember shrugs. “I don’t know how you can trade shattering your teeth for dealing with a little extra flavor. They’re nasty either way, at least this way I don’t have lasting damage from them.” She put half of the brick she had soaked in water in her mouth and began softly chewing at the edges, little by little.

Silver had turned half away and was making a face of absolute repulsion, unable to look away as Em nibbled delicately on the brick of nastiness, appearing unaffected.

Ember had not broken eye contact with Silver since dipping the nutrition brick. She continued to stare at Silver, not blinking as she ate the nutrition brick.

Silver accepts the challenge, narrows her eyes, and leans forward towards Em, saying, “You’re adopted.”

Ember continues eating, unblinking and unaffected.

Silver sits back, nodding. “Okay. If that doesn’t gross you out, what about this one? How about you take my next shift to empty the bucket?” She says with a smile, pointing the book at her and bouncing it as she speaks.

Em blinks, then continues to sit and stare at Silver. She maintains eye contact while still munching on the nutrition brick.

Silver sighs and sits back, shaking her head. “Damn.

You're the toughest bitch I know."

Ember grins a wide and tooth-filled grin.

Silver took out the book and started flipping through the pages, but Em cut her off before she could start reading.

"Wait. Isn't this... kind of... Wrong? Like, training dogs or animals would be okay, but if you can use this to train humans, isn't that the same as brainwashing?" Ember looks confused and intent.

Silver looks down at the book.

"I mean... Knowing how to form associations in people's brains isn't a *bad* thing, because it happens anyway without trying. But if you do it on *purpose*, for the **purpose** of **manipulating**, then it's bad.

"It's kind of like, if you do a 'good' thing, but you do it chaotically and without thought, it can very quickly become a 'bad' thing, right?

"And the reverse is true too, isn't it? If you do a chaotic thing, but with a lot of planning and thought to make sure everybody stays safe, like a well-planned cleaning job or a tricky hoverboarding course, that can make a 'bad' situation 'good', too, right?

"So, it comes down to what your intentions are, right? Intentions, plus effort."

Silver looks up from the book to see if Ember is still paying attention, fully expecting her to have turned back to Isaac and forgotten about Silver by now.

Instead, she sees Ember sitting in front of her, eyes fixed on Silver.

Behind her was a ghostly, ethereal figure that looked like Ember... sort of?

The ethereal figure looked like a hundred different versions of Ember layered on top of each other. Each

version of Ember quickly shuffled together, merging into a combination of all of them and melting back into the current, real Ember.

WHAT-IN-THE-FUCK.

9-year-old Ember says, “I remember this.” As Ghost Ember fades, Ember crawls into Silver’s lap. “Will you please read to me?”

Silver is absolutely freaked the fuck out. But her maternal instincts kicked into full gear with the weight of emotion pouring off her child in her lap.

Silver began to stroke Ember’s knotted hair, then rubs her hand in circles on her back, trying to think of what would cause her to feel this way, regardless of whatever that weird ass ghost thing just was.

Silver kisses the top of Em’s hair and whispers, “I love you, Bugaboo”. She snuggled in, started playing with Ember’s hair, and opened the book.

“Two concepts necessary to understand behaviorism are:

- **Reinforcers**

Increase the probability the behavior will be repeated

- **Punishers**

Decrease the likelihood of the behavior being repeated.

Behavior that is reinforced (rewarded) will likely be repeated, and behavior that is punished will occur less frequently.

By the 1920s, John B. Watson had left academic psychology, and other behaviorists were becoming influential…”

Silver was starting to get a headache from all this jargon. How the hell did Ember read this stuff every single day? She looked down to check on Em and found that she was asleep. Thank god. She could stop reading.

Silver put the book down and was asleep within minutes.

Never in her life did she have weirder dreams than she did that night.

Chapter 3

Buddy woke at sunrise in his shelter, surrounded by plastic bottles.

Buddy's shelter was on level 55, the size of a large closet rather than a large apartment-like room where Silver and Em sheltered.

Lying in his mess, he holds his half-full water bottle above his head, tilting it back and forth. It hasn't rained in days, and he didn't think to collect extra or ration his supply from the last rain.

At least there is a constant supply of water at Tiny's now. He could use some of his reserve credits to buy some today.

Tiny had shown up in the Tower around the same time Ember appeared in Silver's life. Opening up her shop and saving everyone's lives in the Tower. As time passed, her supply went up, so the price went down.

He looked around at his little closet. Surrounded by plastic in an attempt to keep warm, the walls adorned with dried herbs of varying uses, it looked dirty in the daylight, and at night, it was insufficient.

He was bad at surviving.

His mind wandered again to Silver and Em.

He wondered how Silver handled the puppy situation. Obviously, she let her keep it… right?

Another mouth to feed can be hard, but she wouldn't hurt an animal like that. Let alone hurt *Em* like that, assuming… she even let Em know about the puppy in the first place?

He suddenly didn't have the patience to wait to see her.

They were already going to meet at noon at the recruitment zone, and even though that was soon, it wasn't soon enough.

He should go *now* and see if she needed anything. What was the harm in stopping by without plans anyway?

Suddenly filled with energy, he sat up from his ‘pit of despair’, as he so called it, and grabbed his things off the wall to rush to her side.

That thought made him stop in his tracks.

‘Rush to her side.’

She wasn’t his.

He wasn’t hers.

She didn’t *need* him rushing to check on her and be there to support her and her family just because he didn’t have a family of his own.

They were doing better than he was, after all.

He felt lost without her; she was his rock. His foundation. Being around her gave him a certain resolve he hadn’t found anywhere else… but he had no way of knowing if she felt the same.

Frustrated with himself, he sat down where he was, in the doorway of his closet facing the concrete hallway, and meditated.

His mind raced, refusing to relax.

Deep breaths.

Breathe in, hold, and count to four.

Breathe out, slowly, while counting to 4.

He began to repeat to himself, “My mind is blank. My mind is clear. I see with my eyes unclouded. I connect to the world around me through my senses.”

My face itches.

The Tower stinks of mildew.

Damn it, these aren’t the senses I should be focusing on.

It’s fine.

It’s okay.

Just bring it back to the center.

Breathe in through your nose.

Out through your mouth.

Nobody's perfect; we all need to re-adjust sometimes.

I am worried.

There are problems in this life that are weighing me down.

Remember the four truths.

1) There is suffering.

2) There is a cause of the suffering.

3) There is an end to the suffering.

4) There is a path that leads to the end of the suffering.

By following the path, I will find my way.

I have faith in this.

My mind is blank.

My mind is clear.

I am connected to this world, and I am here to help the people in it.

I am ready to-

HOLY FUCK, SOMEONE IS STANDING IN RIGHT FRONT OF ME-

The thought shoots through him like a lightning bolt down his spine.

His eyes shoot open, and he instinctively throws himself back onto one arm, bringing the other up and across his body to defend himself.

Ember is standing in front of him, bent at the waist so that she's eye level with him as he sits.

In her arms is the puppy.

Happy and wiggling.

Well… That was good.

Ember's eyes are curious, much too close, and her head slowly tilts to the side as she stands up while shifting her gaze behind him, into his 'pit of despair.'

Shit.

This was embarrassing.

"Uh… hi," Buddy says, his voice catching before clearing his throat.

Ember's eyes drift back to Buddy, curious but confused. She replies, cautious, "Heeeeyyyyyy. *Whaaaatcha* doin'?"

Buddy is becoming progressively more sullen and uncomfortable.

He narrows his eyes and looks at Em, asking, "What are YOU doing here? You know you aren't supposed to be in this section. The Tower is barely holding together around here; it's more rubble, mold, and moss than concrete."

Em holds Isaac outward in front of her, elbows locked, holding him directly in front of Buddy's face.

"This is Isaac. He needs a place to potty. I thought he might like to, you know, go, on… nature? Instead of on, like, you know, concrete. And, like you said, this area has a lot of moss." She says, shrugging.

Buddy nods in acknowledgment to Isaac. "Hi, Isaac." He says, then thinks for a second, putting

two and two together. “You’re over here often, aren’t you?”

Em smiles sheepishly and says, “Wellllll… there’s a lot of water that flows around here. Or, there was.” Her smile grows confident. “Before I set up my systems.”

Buddy’s mind goes to his half-empty water bottle. Things are starting to make more sense now.

“Guess we found your hideout.” She muses, adjusting Isaac, as she looks to his closet again. “Buuuut… it kinda stinks around here. With all the mold and moss and stuff.” Ember muses idly as she looks around.

Buddy closes his eyes tightly. “Please. Don’t tell Silver. I don’t want her to know I… live here.” He grimaces as he chokes out the last two words.

Buddy takes a deep breath, thinking of all the times he’s used their bath, done his laundry, and washed his teeth, all because they were kind enough to allow him into their shelter.

To use what they had earned and built together.

He felt ashamed of himself; he was such a burden to them.

They didn’t need him bothering them all the time.

After all, he barely contributed to their household. If… if he even contributed at all.

He should get out of their hair sooner rather than later.

“Besides, I won’t be here for long. I was only crashing here for the night. I needed a place to dodge the void, and…” He looks up from the floor to find Ember standing straight up, folding her arms. Isaac struggled in her folded arms, forgotten.

She stared down at him, eyes wide. She seemed angry, her eyes were wide, and her mouth was tense. But… her eyebrows weren’t furrowed?

This child was hard to read.

Although she was only 9, he was genuinely concerned and slightly confused about what she would do next.

“Um… Em…?” Buddy asks.

“You’re lying to me.” Ember continues to stare down at him, face fixed in an unblinking stare, which is juxtaposed with Isaac’s increasing wiggling.

Fuck.

Buddy groans.

He bounces his knee.

He looks to his right, continuing to bounce his knee.

He looked up at the ceiling.

He flexed and rotated his shoulders.

Finally, he took a deep breath.

Then he aggressively let his breath out, all of the wind in his sails along with it.

“Yeah, Wild Child. You got me. I am.” He takes another breath. Let it out. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. I didn’t want you guys to know I… live… like this.” He looks behind him. “It’s shameful.” He looks back at Em. “Don’t tell Silver. Okay? Please?”

Em broke her mannequin-like posture, bent at the hip again, smiling and bringing her face close to his, knocking on the top of his head with the knuckles of one hand.

“No deal.” She smiles wider, “You forget, I love you too, but I’m the one who isn’t afraid to say it.” She giggles, “Get your things, you’re coming home.”

His anxiety skyrockets, home..?

His blood pressure feels like his veins are about to explode.

His eyes lock onto the floor as he tries to process what she said.

Looking back at Ember, he

asks, “And… if I refuse?”

Ember giggles and stands up, patting her mini-duffel. “Oh, you don’t wanna go that route. C’mon. Let’s go.”

Using Em's hovercart, they moved all his things in just one trip.

During this trip, Em asked Buddy several questions about something called "Operant Conditioning", someone named "Pab-a-lob", and if Buddhism helped train people to do tricks.

Buddy estimated Em managed about 180 words per minute (3 words per second) during the 5 minutes they spent moving.

He was impressed with himself for catching any of it.

Then, when they were done moving, Buddy's anxiety got even worse.

It was time for him to meet with Silver, and he was 15 minutes late to boot.

Worse, he was now unexpectedly her roommate that she didn't yet know about.

After dumping his stuff inside their doorway, he rushes to meet Silver.

What the hell was he going to tell her?

Ideas flood his head as he flies to the Recruitment Zone, none of them good.

The Recruitment Zone was a meeting area on level 35 with a large empty room close enough to the enforcers' office, where people gathered for various purposes.

Most commonly, it was to link up with other people to form work parties for the various jobs available.

Other times, it was a gathering area to celebrate on the rare occasion that a celebration was declared.

As Buddy rushed towards the level on his board, he tried to script out how to approach the conversation looming ahead.

"Hi. I live with you now."

No.

"Sup, roomie!"

Definitely not.

“Hi. Your child found that I don’t have a reasonable shelter, so the child strong-armed me, the adult, into moving in with you, without your knowledge or consent. SURPRISE!”

He visibly cringed as that thought popped into his head.

What the hell is wrong with me?

He swung into the open-air hallway on the level, instincts kicking in as he continued into the area on autopilot.

...He could just run away? Jump off the ledge without his hoverboard, dive face-first into the fog, find out what happens -

Suddenly, Silver was in front of his face, and she looked angry.

Oh god, why was she angry?

How could she already know?

Wait, wait.

Breathe.

Ember isn’t here; she couldn’t have beaten me here yet.

There must be something else going on.

Oh.

OH.

Shit.

Right.

He was late.

Relief poured through Buddy; that was the easiest thing to fix: just apologize and say you slept in.

It was then that Ember came crashing in behind him, dodging people as she ran through the crowd, trying to find Silver and Buddy.

On her noisy way, she stopped by a small table in the corner and kicked a stool out from under an old man.

She runs through the crowd, carefully watching for hands that might grab her before she spots Silver.

Running over, she slaps a

note onto Silver's chest, pivots on the ball of her foot, and puts her whole small weight behind punching Buddy in the arm.

She smiles when she sees it was hard enough to knock him back a step, then she dashes out of the area before anyone could catch her.

After he recovered from the punch, Buddy bit a silent "HEY!" at her as she made her chaotic exit, but no sound came out with the motion.

He was still feeling a rather weighty mixed bag of emotions towards her.

If he were less Buddhist, he would like to hit her with said bag of emotions.

Silver stares at the note.

Dear god, what does the note say?

She doesn't look angry.

What does it say.

She looks surprised.

What the ***hell*** does that note say?

Silver looks to the side and smiles a little.

WHAT. DOES. IT. SAY.

She returns to her usual self in full force, punching Buddy in the arm, *hard*.

Really hard.

So hard he is knocked back yet another step.

She smiles and says, "Well, *hi*, roomie!" She makes an angry face once more. "You're late."

He rubbed his arm. She had punched him in the same arm that Em did.

Like mother, like daughter.

Buddy stands there, holding his twice-wounded arm. His shoulders lopsided.

As relief flows through him, tears flood his eyes.

He tilts his head back, looking up, blinking repeatedly, begging them not

to spill over.

He had no idea what to do.

Fuck it.

In that moment, he decided to be bold.

They never said the quiet part out loud.

There were some lines they were very careful not to cross.

He closes the distance between them and lays his forehead on her shoulder, a few tears slip out, falling onto her shoulder while he takes deep breaths.

He needed to center himself; they were still in the crowded room, and he needed to pull it together quickly before other people noticed, while Silver kept him safe.

She always kept him safe.

“I was scared.” He whispers.

Silver hesitates, puts her hands on either side of Buddy’s head, lifts it lightly, raises herself to the tips of her toes, and kisses his forehead before touching hers to his, whispering, “No monsters here.” Rubbing her forehead left and right against his.

After a moment, her stomach turns inside out.

What-

WHY DID SHE DO THAT???

Panic shoots through Silver, causing her to bolt upright and blush so deeply she was almost purple.

She lurches backward, swinging wildly in front of her as she steps backward, desperate for space to protect herself.

Buddy’s emotions withdraw, surprised by her softness.

When he feels her withdraw, he easily responds in kind, stepping back out of range of her panic, laughing softly as he wipes his eyes.

It’s never been easy for her to

let people in.

Looking to change the topic, he clears his throat and smooths out his clothes before asking, “Any thoughts on our third? Or, maybe more relevant, do you know who that guy is?” He gestures to the old guy, who is uprighting his stool.

Silver puffs out her cheeks and blows out some air as she tilts her head to one side. “I think they had a deal…? …and it fell through? Maybe..? …Unsure.”

Straightening her posture, she claps and nods, “Definitely gonna find out though.”

Her attention turns to the room. “As for our third…? Hmmm. What are you thinking? It’s your turn to pick, after all.”

Buddy considers the room. Obviously, they would want someone with a functional evolution, or someone with Golden Goat Blood…

He idly wondered if Dez and Gary would be open to being a team of 4.

It was supposed to be teams of 3, but the Captain’s rules were frustratingly vague. Plus, with this being a larger job, he figured Captain wouldn’t be too strict about the crew size.

Desiree and Gary were… a bit of a handful, though. The last time they had worked together, Silver and Desiree butted heads pretty badly…

Evolutions:

Sticky Palms:

Low ability gives Extra Grip. High Ability lets you Climb Walls

Long Jump, Distances Vary:

Jumping further than 10 meters is unheard of.

Better Bullshit Meter:

In a world full of criminals, some people have developed a better bullshit meter than others.

Super Selective Hearing:

People who can hear the giggle of the void from an incredible distance with insane accuracy. People with this hearing style can occasionally be hard to get the attention of.

"Golden Goat Blood" (Simone Biles Descendants)

Those who are descended from Simone Biles is gifted with astounding acrobatic skills. They have max points in dexterity and constitution.

The Ondras

One of the most gifted family of climbers currently known.

They are a family that is thought to be a legend, myth, or rumor.

Speculation says they live in the highest levels of the Tower to remain outside the reach of the enforcers, away from the corruption that claims its citizens.

Desiree *obviously* had Golden Goat Blood; you could tell from how she moved, while Gary was a bit of a mystery.

He had shown up out of nowhere, was an insanely good climber, and could jump almost 10 full meters.

The recruitment zone was packed with people today, many of whom were settled around the countertop set off to the right of the room, where people went to socialize rather than look for work.

The ones standing in the empty area tended to be in the 'I'm looking for work' area. In contrast, the countertop area was more of a 'let's negotiate' area.

Some of the people who were standing around the work area were:

A poly couple made up of Beth, Lyla, and Raeya

Deziree and Gary

Skit

Markie and Jayquon

Geck

Kiki and Saanvi

Sarita and Miguel

Or another poly couple that was made up of Santiago, Trey, and Ashley

The rules laid out by the enforcers were "Groups of at least 3, with at least one outlier." That meant no groups of 3 who were together more than they were apart.

This often led to short-term alliances between a couple and another group member.

The two groups often swapped out which couple worked together and who was the outlier.

Deziree and Gary, much like Silver and Buddy, only worked together. They refused to split up after the job went out that held a bounty on the heads of children.

They refused to split up, even

when the enforcers demanded it.

People in the Tower learned who was willing to do what, and how much money it would take them to do the unthinkable.

Knowing this made it hard to trust someone with little to no values.

Somehow, Gary and Deziree seemed to have become a target of the enforcers, but nobody was sure why.

They seemed to… disappear during the years of the bounty.

Nobody saw them on either side of the conflict.

But being a target is better than being alone.

Being alone meant you were bad at protecting those around you, or nobody wanted to be around you, even for protection.

Often, people who were alone had been so wholly rejected by this society that the people of the Tower would rather cast them out to die of natural causes than allow them into their groups.

Looking around the room, Buddy asks, “Geck?”

Geck, a small, timid boy with Sticky Palms and plenty of anxiety. He also carried two small torches instead of a flamethrower.

Silver responds, “He’s been a loner as long as we’ve known him, and… people die around him a lot…”

Buddy continues, nodding to the next group, “Lyla, Beth, and Raeya?”

“Yeah, but which one? And there’s always drama with the two that get left behind when we get back…”

“Sarita and Miguel?”

“Maybe? I *am* curious if they’ve hooked up yet…”

Buddy looks away from Silver and down before speaking, “People don’t *have* to hook up to be part of a team…” he says

quietly, looking away.

“Yeah, but those two?” Silver scoffs, “It’s only a matter of time,” She says, chuckling.

“Fair… I guess…” Buddy shifts uncomfortably before continuing, “Kiki and Saanvi?”

“Maybe Saanvi, she’s a hell of a powerhouse, and their reunion is always adorable.” Silver replies, smiling warmly.

“Markie and Jayquon?” Buddy asks, looking back at the crowd.

Silver gags, “Look, homie, I’m sorry, but I can’t handle another conversation involving that much gossip. You know? I always rush to finish the job to stop hearing… things.”

Buddy laughs, “Faster job, faster paycheck.”

“Yeah, but what if the enforcers check our work *again* and it isn’t good enough? *Again*. Then the enforcers take our money back, *again*.” Silver complains.

Buddy makes a face, “Should I even suggest…?”

“Skit can go fuck himself.” Silver said firmly, her eyebrows pulled together and her lips straightened into a tight line. She shook her head.

Skit was hanging out in the corner by himself, watching the crowd. As usual, he carried his plague doctor bird mask with black feathers lining the frame.

He was wearing the mask kicked back on his forehead as he scanned the room, his head on a swivel, interrupted by the occasional giggle or twitch.

Skit is just as likely to be your teammate as he is to kick you over the edge unprovoked.

Buddy wanted to stay as far away from him as possible.

People died around him, even when the situation was as safe as it could be around here.

Buddy nods in agreement, “Deziree and Gary, then?”

Silver groans, “I mean… I guess.” She shakes her head and mumbles, “I hope I didn’t piss off Dez too much last time…” as they start to walk over to them.

Together, they cross the room to approach Desiree and Gary.

The couple is leaning against the far wall. Gary was surveying the crowd, clearly unhappy as Desiree leans against the wall, napping on his shoulder.

Gary locks eyes on them as they approach, and does not disengage until they arrive at their table.

He raises and drops his shoulder a few times, nudging Desiree awake.

Desiree sleepily lolls her head back, looking up at Gary. He briefly tilts his head on top of hers, then finishes standing up, forcing her to stand up too.

Desiree lets out a big yawn and stretches. She looks around and takes in her surroundings.

She hates it.

She then sees Silver and Buddy in front of them.

Frowning, she asks, “Partners?”

Surprise runs through them; they didn’t expect this to be so easy. “Um… Yeah. If you don’t mind a group of 4 again?” Asks Silver.

“Whatever gets me the fuck out of here.” Says Desiree, her posture slumped, her chin jutted forward as she walks away from the other 3 towards the exit.

“Uh… Okay. We’ll go report and get an assignment. Meet here in the hallways tomorrow around midday to begin?” Asks Buddy.

“Amazing. See you then.” Gary says with a smile and a nod to Buddy and Silver.

Catching up with Desiree, he says, “See, Love? Told you it wouldn’t take long.”

Buddy and Silver look at each other, shrug, and then head for the exit.

That went better than they had hoped.

Arriving at the enforcer's office, the same rebreather enforcer greets them, still wearing her mask.

Buddy thinks to himself, trying to remember her name, '...Carol? Maybe?'

While being careful not to make any physical contact with them, she signs them in and quickly sanitizes anything they had come near.

She finishes dousing everything in sanitizer, then sends them back to the Captain's waiting room, where they sit in hard chairs for a moment.

Buddy would have rathered to sit on the floor than in the chairs.

Soon, the Captain comes out and calls them back.

As usual, Buddy stands silent against the wall at the back, while Silver steps forward, giving the report. "We have added two members to our team, Desiree and Gary. We enlisted them from the Recruitment Zone today at approximately 1245 hours, then made our way here to request our assignment as a four-man crew."

At the mention of the word 'man', the Captain looks up from his paperwork, looks Silver up and down, then 'Hmph's.

"Well, Desiree and Gary *are* on the roster, so they're eligible for assignments. Level 4, same as you. Tell you what. Since you got hit with a... moderate... financial penalty last time and are now splitting your wages four ways... Which we all *know* is **frowned upon.**

"Let's give you guys something a little more... **Rewarding**, this time? Hmm? How does that sound?" His eyes narrow as he smiles a wide, cold smile.

Silver stiffens. They always need the money; everyone on this planet is drowning in debt.

Anything you couldn't make

yourself required credits.

Nutrition bricks, their only source of vitamins or minerals, often require life-risking measures to obtain… and if she said ‘no’, the enforcers could come take *everything* from her at any time.

She is a starved dog on a chain, and knew it.

“Yes, Captain,” Silver says, stiffly.

The room was silent. Buddy could hear Silver swallow hard.

The Captain’s smile grew venomous. “*Good*… How about you assess the extent of damage you did during your last escapade on levels 75-100? To be completed no longer than three days from tomorrow.

“Then tell me what you find. Recon only. Tell me where the void is, anything else you find, and what needs to be repaired.”

Silver's stomach drops. 25 levels is unheard of. “May I ask the rate, should the job be completed, Sir?”

The Captain's face cools slightly, “25 levels, 25 credits per person, per level, for whoever makes it back and who files a report that matches the others' reports.”

Silver tries to keep a blank face, but all she feels is shock and astonishment.

The usual rate was 25 credits per floor for a whole 3-man group for the cleaning jobs, which were considered dangerous, especially depending on the level.

The recon jobs, which were generally considered the safer jobs, were paid 10 credits per floor for the whole 3-man team.

Silver knew she couldn’t say no. If she said no, she would be cut off at the knees for any future jobs she could even get on the list for.

If she said yes, she had to perform up to expectations or

die trying.

“Yes, sir.” She replied, stiffly.

“That’s my girl. Do me a favor, bring home a *gold* medal, this time, will you?”

The Captain presses a button, and the enforcer with the rebreather enters the room and sees them out, sanitizing everything behind them as they leave.

Chapter 4

Ember woke up at dawn with the sun.

Scooping up the sleeping Isaac, she cradled him and moved towards the nearly dead fire.

And immediately stepped into a cold puddle of puppy piddle.

She recoiled with disgust as she felt the cold pee between her toes, and began hopping on one foot while flicking the other in the air to free it of puppy piddle.

She would need to talk to Silver about how to stop that from happening again.

She cleaned up her foot, cleaned up the mess, gathered the materials for her chores, and then turned to look at Isaac.

She stood with her legs apart, fists on her hips, and elbows out, arms akimbo.

Ember's face squished into concentration, then lit up with an idea.

Ember grabbed a scarf from Silver's duffel and used a method she had done a thousand times before she had met Silver.

She swaddled Isaac to her chest the way she used to swaddle babies when her job was to watch the orphans or other babies whose caregivers were busy with jobs.

Back when enforcers still paid for their care, formula, and general well-being.

Instead of paying for their murder.

Ta-Da! Isaac was swaddled with his back to her chest, his limbs protruding forward like a confused toddler.

They set out for her morning routine.

First, she hops on her hoverboard and heads up to levels 87 and 89 to check on her plastic tarp traps set out to collect morning dew and funnel it down into various buckets.

Daily, she would collect the water from the buckets and pat the plastic tarps, getting as much as she could before swapping out the bottles.

Then she married the bottles of water in her mini-duffel, filling as few bottles as full as she could before moving on to the next collection site.

Cruising along the upper levels with Isaac strapped to her chest, she saw a significant amount of damage that had appeared the other day was already fixing itself.

Parts of the upper levels were no longer sagging away from the Tower.

The Tower had been damaged before, and just like the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that, thick black ropes emerged from the Tower, binding the broken pieces back together.

Shiny black ooze gluing the broken pieces back together.

Was that void? She refused to get close enough to find out.

After her mini-duffel was full of morning dew water, she swung by the 65th floor and chucked the bottles one at a time through an open concrete window with a wooden shutter and a wooden board propping it open.

Em listened for the satisfying thunk of each bottle hitting the bin inside, then kept moving.

Her next step was to go back to level 55 and start looking for any runoff water that had collected into the containers she had set up throughout the building itself. Em had also set up some tarps here, though not many, since they often got stolen for cheap, ineffective doors.

She always felt the need to creep around when she was in this part of the building.

There was so much mold and moss; it felt like it was going to come alive, like void.

She quickly unwrapped Isaac and put him down, in case he noticed anything before she did.

He did notice something!

He started sniffing, then he caught the scent of something, and-

Oh no-

He was off.

“Isaac! Wait!” Ember ran after him, thankful when he didn’t go far.

After she rounded the corner, she found him, sniffing the knee of… Buddy?

Who was deep in meditation outside of… his shelter?

She picked up Isaac and stepped back to give Buddy space.

Surely, he would notice her, right?

She waited.

…

He wasn’t noticing her.

…

She quickly grew tired of waiting.

She leaned forward so that they were eye level, though he was sitting and she was standing.

Should she flick his forehead?

He opened his eyes.

After helping Buddy move in with them and running the note to Silver to help them break the ice so they wouldn't fight any more than they normally would, Ember went over to see Tiny for the rest of her errands.

Tiny BadBitch runs a black-market shop on the 65th floor that takes up the *entire* 65th floor.

In total, the customers are only allowed in one room, which is the entryway.

She had blocked off the walkway surrounding the outside of her level, leaving only a 10'x20' room where the customers could wait for her to open her door.

Her door could be opened either fully or as a half door with a small ledge where she would serve her wares to her customers.

Her shop, like many levels, is only accessible by hoverboard.

Tiny has sealed off all access points on the floor, where there was normally a hallway surrounding the outside of levels 50 and below. She had filled the hallways in, creating a choke point so anyone who wanted to access her shop without her permission had to tear down a concrete wall or knock and say hi.

There were windows, all of which had coverings strong enough and able to be sealed to keep out the void, while still being cozy on the inside.

Ember whipped into the entryway on her board and knocked on her door.

Knock-Knock-KnockKnock-Knock.

From inside, you hear two loud bangs that sound like a barbarian has punched two holes in the wall as a response. Knock-Knock.

The knocking, if it could be called that, sounded like it was coming from the other side of the level, so it might take a few minutes for her to reach the door, especially if

she needed to wash up.

Ember loves Tiny; it feels like visiting a family member that doesn't live with you.

Tiny has been the one to teach Ember (almost) everything she knows about cooking and hunting. Ember keeps begging her to teach her more about processing meat and other ways to cook the meat besides curing, smoking, dehydrating, and roasting. Tiny always says she isn't old enough yet.

Tiny even slips Ember a few strawberries, and other berries now and again, when nobody is looking.

Strawberries are Ember's favorite; they're impossible to come by, obviously, since fresh fruits and vegetables carry a death sentence if you're caught with them by an enforcer.

But they're worth the risk, Ember thinks to herself.

Tiny's the only person in the whole world who risks growing anything, and Ember might be the only person who knows that she takes that risk.

She even thinks she might be growing them just for her.

Ember sits and plays tug-of-war with Isaac, using the scarf while they wait.

Soon, the door flies open, and towering in the doorway, in all of her colorful glory, is Tiny.

Tiny BadBitch is 6'4", 240 pounds of pure muscle. She has short pink hair, a purple goatee, an Adams apple that is only noticeable on occasion, and according to her, she has 14 piercings, though less than that are visible.

She throws her arms up and booms out, "EMBER!! How good to see you, I've missed you, where've you been? It's been ages." She laughs at her own joke, since they see each other every day for

Ember's water collecting job, then she notices Isaac.

Her eyes grow wide and water as she clutches her hands to her mouth. Her voice shrinks, and she says, in the highest-pitched voice, **"OH-MY-GAWD-IS-THAT-A-PUPPY??? CAN I PET HIM HE'S SOO CUTEEE!!!!!"**

Ember thinks Tiny might have broken her eardrums for a moment, but giggles, picks up Isaac, and hands him to her.

Tiny melts to the floor.

Isaac is drowning Tiny in kisses, and Tiny is drowning Isaac in praise and love.

"Awww, you cutie wootsie little *thang!!!"*

The two begin playing tug-of-war on the floor. Isaac brings the scarf to Tiny and gives an effortful head shake, followed by what was surely meant to be an intimidating growl.

After some time, the three of them are on the ground. Tiny has rolled over on her back and pretended she died.

Isaac was standing on the ground, paws on her face, chewing and tugging on her hair in celebration.

After a while, everyone settles down, and they move into Tiny's well-armored shop.

Tiny is carrying Isaac and immediately goes to one of her many storage boxes. She pulls out some dehydrated meat and asks Isaac over and over, "You want some FOOOD? Huh? Want some *FOOOD*, good boy? You're a *good boy*, aren't you, Isaac! Gonna grow up Big and Strong and take care of little miss Ember, *aren't you, you cutie wootie menacing little thing?"*

She places Isaac on the floor, the meat on the counter, and opens a drawer for a knife. As she begins to mince the meat for Isaac, she says to Em, "He's gonna need fresh meat twice a day, you know that, right?"

Ember smiles and shifts from foot to foot. “I *knowww*… That’s kinda why we’re here?” She curved the end of her sentence to make it into a question while looking at the floor.

Tiny finished mincing the meat and placed it on the floor for Isaac. She turned to look at Em. “Uh-huh. Let me guess. You wanna make a deal.” She says, curving her lips into a smile.

Ember looked up at her with big eyes and shifted from side to side. “I’m reliable! I get you water *every* morning, even when it hasn’t rained in **days**. Nobody else can do that!”

Tiny nods and keeps listening, finishing preparing the breakfast for Isaac and moving on to picking out a special bowl for him as Ember talked.

“I’m not asking for much. I already hunt two or three times a week to keep Silver and me fed, and that should be enough for him, too, *right??*” Ember whines.

Tiny sighs, shoulders drooping. “Hun, if you go hunting two times in one week, and you get a good haul both times, do you go hunting on the third day?”

Tiny then held up two different options for food bowls for the puppy, raising one and then the other for Ember to choose between.

Ember pointed at the one on the left. She looked confused. “No?”

Tiny picked up his breakfast from the floor, putting it into his bowl that Ember picked out, and kneeling to give it back as she nodded to him, saying “I do see what you’re saying, about him living on your scraps that you usually give to me because you never needed them before, and now, well, you do.

“And believe me, that’s no problem, your meat is your meat. But you gotta know, he’s gonna get bigger, and he’s gonna be eating more,

and by the end of the year, he's gonna need a whole 'nother good hunting day all for himself. Will he eat a whole alligator tail?"

She gestured with a knife as she spoke.

"Probably not, but he will for darn sure eat at least a whole duck in one sitting. You and Silver can make a duck last a full day. By the end of this year, he will need at least two ducks' worth of meat per day. You feel me?" Tiny turned back to her cabinet to look at the bowls again while talking. She had picked out two more and offered them to Ember the same way she had offered the other bowls.

Ember picked the one on the right this time; it sort of matched the other one she had picked. Hearing what Tiny had said, she looked at Isaac. "Did I get a dog, or a bear? *Jeeesus*."

"Then there's water. He needs water, too." Tiny says, as she fills the second bowl, Ember picked out with a bottle Ember had just given Tiny, she puts half the bottle in the bowl and offers it to the pup, who drinks thirstily.

"Oh yeah…" Em says, making a face.

Tiny laughs. "I'll tell you what, kid. Let's ease you into this. I'll start buying scraps from people who don't want theirs, and make it so people can make a tidy profit off gettin' me, say, a rabbit's worth of meat a day. That way, we'll have some flowing in from multiple sources as a backup.

"Next, let's get you out hunting more. If you go hunting 4 days per week, and report in before and after you go hunting, that way I know you're making a serious effort, I'll make sure you have enough meat to feed Isaac breakfast and dinner even if you come up dry.

"If you keep turning up dry when hunting, we can talk about strategy and see if we

can fix that, too.

“Now, here's where *I* win. If you go hunting 4 days in a row and get a good haul all four days, you take home enough meat to feed Isaac, plus as much meat as you would have if you had only gone hunting the two days to be able to feed you and Silver, plus some extra. I keep the rest.

“Deal?” Tiny asks, smiling.

Ember throws herself into Tiny’s arms and yells, “DEAL!! Tiny, you’re the BEST!! Thank you, thank you, thank you!!!”

Tiny hugs Em back and says, “Congratulations, kid. You just got your first job, you reliable 9-year-old, you.” She messes up Ember’s already messy hair, and they laugh.

“Oh-Oh-Oh!! Can you help me get a pack for Isaac? That way, he can help me carry the hunted game back to you? And I can clip him into my cart?” Ember’s eyes were sparkling as she looked up at Tiny while holding onto her waist.

Tiny chuckles, “Sure, kid, I’ll make it myself.”

Em continued, bubbling with excitement, “Oh! Oh! With a leash too! And a handle in case he gets too close to the edge!! Oh! And he needs a rebreather too!! Please, please, *please!!!*”

Tiny laughs and shakes her head, “You got it, kid. I’ll make it happen today. Come get it after the shop closes.” And pulls her into a big bear hug.

As Ember leaves Tiny's 65th floor, she pauses in the entryway to bundle Isaac in his scarf again.

Once her puppy is secured, she snags her hoverboard and hops off the ledge, sliding the hoverboard under her feet and turning it on as she falls.

This causes the engines to run hot as it slows her down. Keeping crouched, she tilts into an angle where she is able to coax the engines of the hoverboards into a faster burn than anyone else has managed to, based on the competitions she's been able to win.

Ember spends this burn spiraling up around the Tower, looking for a spot particularly covered in vines she can come back with her cart to collect for their nightly fires.

She spots a section of the Tower that is particularly green around level 55, on the southeast side.

Ember kneels down and flips the switch for the board off, allowing her to free-fall for a few moments.

She enjoyed the silence of the crescendo, feeling herself begin to fall.

The world began to tilt and twirl as she fell towards it, eyes closed, relaxed, fingers curled lightly around the hoverboard.

Isaac let out a few panicked whimpers, feeling free-fall for the first time.

Ember's eyes open.

Upside down and spinning, Ember sticks out her hand, fingers cupped, using the air currents to flip her over.

Right side up, she flips the switch to her hoverboard. The engines kick in.

All that's left is to correct the spin. Ember tilts to one side and corkscrews out of the spin with a measured and consistent angle of her board.

The overburn of her engine compensated for the corkscrew's increased gravity; by the time she had pulled out of the turn, Em was calm, focused.

Isaac had piddled in the scarf.

Ember and Isaac arrived back at their shelter. Her cart already held her sawing knives and other gear, Em grabbed her hovercart and a new scarf for Isaac.

Next, she changed out of puppy piddle clothes, washing up before changing into her back up outfit.

Before leaving, she heads to the back of their shelter. At the back of the shelter, on the left, there are three large racks.

Each rack is covered by a tarp and used to physically block a window covered with another tarp and sealed at the edges.

The tarps get sun during the day, which heats up the small room and helps the vines dry out, and their placement helps protect the shelter against the void.

Em opens the three tarps covering the racks. She then moved the vines from the 'middle'/ 'maybe' rack to the 'dry' rack, from the 'wet' rack to the 'middle'/ 'maybe' rack, and then made a quick inventory of how much they had been using versus how much they had.

The results weren't good.

The days were getting shorter, which meant the nights were getting longer, and they would need more fire to stay safe. This haul would need to be double-sized.

Ember sighed, scooped out some more 'moisture-sucking' packets from their bucket, and tossed them in the maybe and wet racks. The packets came as a reward for doing work that involved fixing parts of the Tower, but not always.

Ember bundled up Isaac again and clipped her hovercart to her board. This time, they took off from a standstill, using the hoverboard's kickstands to keep it in place as they stepped onto it.

They slowly plodded back up to level 55, on the southeast side, where Ember had seen the particularly green section shortly before her free-fall.

Ember uses her knives to load up the cart with thick chunks of vine, equal in length to each of her arms.

Once her hovercart was full, she buttoned the top flap, securing the vines, and they returned to the shelter.

There, they loaded the vines into the 'wet' storage rack. Thankfully, there were more than enough on level 55 to return for many more runs.

However, before returning, Ember paced around their shelter, tossing the knife in the air and catching it by the handle as she mulled over how to structure her new schedule.

Something felt good about planning for the future, for once, and she wanted to lean into it.

She had 4 days of hunting to work in from here forward.

As she paced, she thought about her current schedule.

It was fairly nonexistent; she pretty much did whatever was necessary for that day, on that day.

Besides water, which she did every morning when she woke up.

Ember decides she is going to try to overshoot it; she will try to go hunting 5 days on, then take 2 days off.

Hopefully, then she'll be ahead and won't be able to fall behind.

She just needed to make sure she didn't skip too many days.

Ember nods to herself, solidifying her plans

internally and sheathing her knife. However, not ready to go out and do vine collecting again already, she decides to play with Isaac some more.

They play tug-of-war with various items around the shelter. Then Ember starts getting curious about the book Silver has given her.

Could she really teach Isaac to listen to her with it?

Em gets the book out of her mini- duffel and transitions from standing to lying on the floor by doing a forward roll that ends with her legs smacking against the wall, facing straight up.

As Em holds the book straight in the air, vertical to her face, she begins to read the book, seemingly for the first time.

She looks up at Isaac sitting on the floor, playing with her hair on the top of her head.

As she tilts her head up to look at him, he sits back and tilts his head to the side to look at her, both ears flopping to one side.

As she lies there staring at Isaac, something clicks for Em, “Isaac!! You’re sitting!!” Ember exclaims, hurrying to sit up herself.

Em then got up off the floor and stood in front of Isaac, while Isaac followed her up to stand as well.

“Good *boy*, Isaac! Okay, now… how the hell do I get you to do that again…” Em pushed her jaw forward and to the left, placing her right thumb on the right side of her jaw as she considered this.

Isaac danced around her, excited that she was so happy for some reason.

While he danced, she looked around the shelter. What tools were available..?

As she looked, her eyes fell on their storage bin of dehydrated meat.

A-ha!

She had an idea.

Em grabbed a handful of

dehydrated duck, ripped it into tiny pieces, and stuffed it in her pocket.

She turned to Isaac and said, "*ssiiiiiiiittttt*."

Isaac stood, cocking his head to one side, excited and panting happily about the sudden appearance of snacks.

Ember tried again, "*SIT*, boy!!" she said, not moving.

Isaac responded by dancing and barking in agreement. Yeah!! *Snacks!!*

Em sat there, lips pursed and one finger in front of them in the 'shush' position as she considered this.

Then she had an idea.

What if-

What if she could *guide* him into sitting, then praise him a whole bunch to show him that was what she wanted?

She took a small piece of duck meat, broke it in half to make it even smaller, and looked at Isaac.

He was saddened when the piece became smaller.

Isaac was standing on all fours.

Em began to slowly guide the meat above Isaac's head behind him, hoping he would plop his butt on the ground.

But he just backed up.

Hm...

Close, though.

Em bent at the waist to get near Isaac's eye level, wanting to get into his little doggy head.

As she bent, he licked at the hand that held the treat.

Ember couldn't help but laugh, exclaiming, "Eww!!! Yucky!!!"

She stood up and put the meat back in her pocket while she thought.

She was onto something with bringing the treat back, even if it only got him to back up.

What if...

What if she stood behind him?

After all… maybe to get his back end to go down, his head would need to go up?

Em nodded to herself.

She went to stand behind Isaac, which was difficult to say the least, as he was dancing happily for treats.

When she finally got him standing with his butt to her knees, she tried again.

She started with the treat in front of him, hovering at his nose level, then slowly moved it towards him.

She ended up bent over with one arm around his chest/neck area, holding him in place to keep him from lunging for the treat.

She slowly moved the treat towards him, and as it got just under six inches in front of his nose, she started moving it up and just out of reach, so he had to tilt just his nose up to try to lick the treat.

He lunged forward against her arm, wanting the treat.

It began to go above his head.

No!

He didn't want it to get away!

He tried to jump.

Oops, he knocked his head into her head!

What was she *doing??*

It was going to get away!!

He tried to back up to keep the treat in sight.

His butt couldn't move!

He quickly sat down so he could raise his chin higher and try to lick the treat.

Ember gasped- *HE SAT.*

Isaac was thrilled. She gave him the treat!

Em praised him and praised him, and he had no idea why.

But he really liked it when she praised him.

They repeated the procedure several more times, this time

with Em saying “siiiiiiiiiiiittt” each time as she guided him into the sitting position.

After a few repeats, Isaac realized he could hurry the process along by beating her to the punch and sitting whenever she reached for a treat!

They continued to work on the new skill for several minutes, and at the end, Isaac realized ‘sit’ meant to put his butt down, then he got a treat.

Or praise.

Or both!

Ember frequently took breaks from training to do happy dances, and Isaac would jump and dance with her when she did.

He didn’t know why this girl was so happy, but he loved that she was.

In these first moments of training, ‘Isaac’ decided he would do what he could to keep this girl happy, forever.

After Em and Isaac finished establishing 'sit', they got the hovercart and headed back to level 55 to collect another cartload of vines.

When they got back to the southeast corner they found themselves near the entrance to some of the shelters that were so run down, they had been unoccupied until recently.

Whoever was crashing here must be desperate, hiding, or both, to subject themselves to these conditions.

The Tower here was mostly rubble with a frustrating amount of dirty water seeping through the cracks.

There was just enough water to make everything damp, smelly, and to begin the process of decay, but there was no way to consume it safely for life-sustaining purposes.

It frustrated Em to no end that there was so much here she could collect, but no realistic way she could do anything with it.

Then again, maybe the people who moved in weren't concerned with what they were subjecting themselves to, given the state of their conversation.

Ember ignored the voices at first, mindlessly sawing through some vines.

However, she became hyper-aware of the owner of one of the voices when the face of a teenager poked itself out of a doorway and stared at her for a few seconds, before dissolving back into the shadows inside.

Bits of conversation began trickling into earshot.

"Nah, it's just that kid. Silver's tag-along."

"Oh, okay, cool. What's she doing?"

"Dunno, looks like she's cutting the vines or some shit."

"Haha. What a waste of

space. Whatever, less bullshit for us to trip over on piss trips to the edge. ***HEY, THANKS, LOSER!!*** **Bwahahaha."**

The two inside become intensely occupied with something else.

"You're welcome..." Ember mumbled. She continued to work, carving out uniform vine sections and slowly loading up her cart.

Isaac wiggled against her chest. He wanted to get down, but Ember was *not* comfortable with that idea at the moment.

She began to hear coughing from inside the shelter, followed by some small chuckles.

"...said that they could summon a *Demigod*, bro, a *DEMIGOD*. The only problem is they're broke; they even say it in their name, *duuude*."

Cough, cough. "No way, heheh. If anyone could summon a Demigod to fight for them, you KNOW that Timmy" cough cough, "would be *all over that shit.* Can't be real. I call BS."

"No *wayyy* dude!! I swear, like," cough "put out the secret in one of his songs, or some shit. People called him Broke Baby, or Baby no gummies, or maybe Baby no muddies? I don't fukkn know, maan! But check this out, who puts **THIS** in their song, if it isn't supposed to be a spell? Maaan, c'mon.

"'That's One to the Kidney, Two for a blow, Now you gotta Left Right Left Right Left Right Go.'

"Those are totally fighting words!! What *else* could it mean!!"

The two dissolved into manic giggling at this point, hardly able to get a word out. "...spells..." "Gods..." "war..." "...may as well strike us down where we lie for all the good we'll do them." The last coherent statement was followed by an eruption of

manic laughter, covering Ember in goosebumps.

She fled the area, Isaac still strapped to her chest and cart just over half full.

As she flew away, Ember felt shame for running.

She immediately decided the best way to process that shame would be to prove her worth by providing for her family.

So she decided to go and kill something acceptable to kill.

After dropping off the vines, of course.

Twenty minutes later, the vines were stored properly, Ember had grabbed her weapons, and the Ember Isaac Duo were on their way back to Tiny's to report in before heading out hunting.

The weapon Ember hunted with was a compound crossbow, with an emergency bowie knife attached near the handle.

The knife was attached so the handle was facing Ember when she was holding the crossbow; that way, she could grab the handle and pull the knife to her chest if she needed to defend herself quickly.

Em swaddled Isaac again and stepped onto her hoverboard, traveling softly. She arrived at level 65, swinging by the window where she had thrown bottles that morning.

Ember crouched down on her board, holding onto the board with one hand and grabbing the wooden flap that covered the window with the other. Gently, she banged it shut a few times to knock. Soon, Tiny showed up at the window, wiping her hands on a cloth. She appeared to have been cleaning a catch.

Isaac barked happily when Tiny appeared, causing Tiny to smile warmly.

“Hunting now,” Ember said, waving with the hand she had knocked with, still holding her board with the other.

Tiny “Mmm”’d, nodded and waved back, walking away from the window.

Em closed her eyes for a moment, exploring her senses the way Buddy talked about. She took in the wind, the sun, the clothes she was wearing, the dry air, and Isaac pressed to her chest.

Then she reached outward, and the fact that she was up so incredibly high.

If she fell from here, it would take a solid two minutes to hit the ground.

An image of the teenager staring at her from the doorway came alive behind her eyelids, followed by their giggling.

She immediately recoiled, causing the board to wobble

under her.

She chastised herself for her lack of focus.

Taking another breath, she let it out, cutting the engines.

Isaac whimpered as they began to free-fall.

Ember kept her eyes closed.

She felt the wind begin to change, and the sun began to hit her from different angles, moving faster and faster.

She let go of her emotions, embracing the chaos.

After about ten levels, she kicked the engines back on and began leveling out her spin.

By the time she had dropped ten more, she was coasting softly.

Isaac didn't pee this time, but he was shaking.

As they drifted past the enforcer's office, Ember stared at the doors.

Doors. What must that be like?

To know that the only things in the room were things you invited?

Weiiird.

She understood why they had them, though.

It was the same reason Tiny had them.

For protection.

Ember felt a pang of jealousy and nudged her hoverboard along.

Soon after, they reached the rubble descent.

When they first built Jenga Tower, they didn't have hoverboards yet. This meant the first twenty-five levels had been built with concrete stairs that were meant to be walked up.

Over hundreds of years, thousands of large animals had been worn down to rubble slopes.

This is where most animals make their way onto Jenga Tower.

Ember takes a few deep breaths, preparing herself to be dangerously close to the fog.

“You ready, buddy?” she asks Isaac as she pets him softly on the head.

They slowly make their way down the levels, searching for prey.

Em knows this is likely Isaac’s first time near the fog, since he was so young.

She needs to be quiet, and to have him be quiet, to have the advantage over anything she is trying to hunt.

They move down five levels, aware that the fog is close enough you could taste it in the air.

Now on level twenty, they begin to hear movement from below.

Em pauses to listen.

Isaac, having picked up on the tension of the situation, cocks his head in the same direction she does.

There is a deep, dragging sound from the level just below them, accompanied by thick scratching.

Ember smiles, looks at Isaac still strapped to her chest, and silently scratches the top of his head.

He supposes the scratching means something good, but her smile right now isn’t the same smile she had been giving him since they had met.

Wary of bringing the hovercart near a potential battle, Ember stops a ways back from the crumbled stairs on level twenty to prepare.

She turns off her board and cart, setting them both on their kickstands. She then unbuttons the top flap over her cart and removes her weapons.

She removes the crossbow, equips the quiver that she reloads every night, slips her foot into the stirrup, and effortlessly loads a bolt.

They begin their descent.

Moving slowly down each level, they search for their prey.

Finally, on level 17, they see something.

They had found it, the gator they had been hearing.

The fog is thick, nearly lapping at their feet.

It comes to an abrupt halt halfway up the level just below her, level 16.

Occasionally, wind whisped a thick strand of fog onto her level, forming long curls of burning fog before dissipating into her air, burning Ember's lungs, eyes, and skin.

The gator had been adjusting itself on the loose gravel as she walked towards the staircase, getting ready to charge her before she spotted it.

Technically, Isaac spotted it before her.

Seemingly unaffected by the proximity to the fog, his ears and head alerted in its direction as Ember was creeping along slowly, using the wall as support as she crouched.

Ember immediately came to a halt, trying to spot what he had seen, rubbing her eyes to clear them, she saw it.

Its eyes peered just over the edge of the next rubble descent.

If Isaac hadn't alerted, she would've walked right into it.

Its eyes were the only thing poking out onto the level that Em and Isaac were on.

The three of them stared at each other for a few tense seconds.

Nobody moved.

Then, Ember had a thought. 'If eyes are all I can see, then that's what I'll shoot.'

She lifted her crossbow and took aim at its eye, which prompted it to blink.

How close were they?

10 meters?

She could do this.

The gator began to stir.

Despite what you would think, these things were *fast*.

The bigger they were, the faster they were, too.

Ember had had to run from a few of these in the past; that was how she had learned the trick to making hoverboards go faster than they were supposed to.

Had she not figured that out, the gator would have caught up to her easily.

She had one shot, and it was daring her to take it.

Swallowing hard, she wondered how big this thing was to be this unafraid of her.

Or how hungry?

Ignoring that thought, and all others trying to make their way into her head, she took a natural breath in, out, in, out, waiting for the natural respiratory pause.

While she timed her natural respiratory pause, she took time to aim.

The next time she hit the natural respiratory pause, she slowly pulled back on the trigger.

As soon as the bolt was released, all thoughts broke loose in Ember's mind.

RUN?

FLY?

FLEE?

Fukkn HELL, DID I GET IT??

She hears the wet *thunk* of the bolt lodging itself into… something.

Then, a groaning, rattling noise as the gator lets out its final breath, and its head slumps over.

Ember waits a full twenty breaths more, staring at it, waiting for signs of life before approaching through the rubble.

As she and Isaac approach the rubble slope, she sees that the gator is easily 2 times her size in tail alone.

Which was good, the tail was all you could eat on these guys.

She groaned in frustration.

It was *absolutely* over her hovercart's max weight.

She would have to transport it in sections, bunny hopping the game up to Tiny's level.

Slow as they go, they retrieve her cart and reattach it to her board.

Chapter 5

When Ember and Isaac arrive at Tiny's, they pull into the entryway again and Em knocks their classic knocking game.

Ember unloads the game from her cart into Tiny's level, then hurries into the entryway to grab the rest of the tail she had left there.

Tiny is leaned up on one of the walls as she brings it in, impressed at her catch. "What level did you catch this thing on?"

Ember hesitates before answering. "Level 20?"

"20?" Tiny whistles. "You have your rebreather? It's bad down there if you're not careful; wind kicks up the fog quite a bit, not to mention Bai... Though." She thinks for a moment, "Actually... I think he'd be okay with you." She gives Em a once-over. "Anyway, you had your rebreather, right?"

"I... uh... don't have a rebreather anymore..." Ember looks away. She doesn't want Tiny to worry, so she decides to lie. "I... uh... I lost it. I don't know what happened to it." She shrugs, "It just disappeared."

Tiny stops working and looks her dead in the face, pointing her butchers knife at her as she speaks, "I *will not* help you again unless you tell me the **truth** *right now*." She smacks her knife into the counter to emphasize her point. "If someone stole it, I'm going to find out who and kill them myself.

"If it's in your shelter somewhere, I'm going to go into that rat's nest of a shelter and tear it apart piece by piece until I find it, then you'll have only seconds to put it back together before Silver comes looking to save you with that 6th sense of hers." Tiny's eye contact began to make Ember feel like she was being weighed down the more she talked. Her body turned to lead, her lungs struggled to open, and her pulse slowed down.

Ember looks at the floor. "I... ran out of cartridges and couldn't afford more..."

Tiny sighs, and with her sigh, the air floods back into the room.

Tiny is standing there, looking smaller than normal, her arms limp at her sides, her head lolled back, Adam's apple protruding forward. She thinks to herself, 'This god damn, mother fucking kid, is gonna be the death of me, I swear to every single Buddha that will hear me.'

She takes a deep breath, slowly lets it out, then says, "Get it together, Kari, what the hell."

You hear her mumbling as she walks away into the back room, banging around, items flying from one room and smashing onto the walls of the room opposite it.

She comes back with 10 carriages and 5 extra pounds of salt, which Tiny had intended to use for curing meat.

The salt was a reward for the child for telling the truth. "Don't ***ever*** go into that fog again unprotected, you hear me? You **come to me** if you need help. End of story. Understood?"

Ember couldn't look Tiny in the eyes.

"Yes, ma'am..." Ember hears the cartridge clack as they are set on the counter, and something that sounded like... salt? In a few bags.

It was then she noticed she was starting to feel weird.

She feels exhausted, but it's coming and going in waves.

Each wave is more tiring than the last.

'Whatever, I guess I just need to push through it...' she thinks.

"Thank you." Tiny takes another deep breath and lets it out. "You're a good kid, you know? Not even double digits, and you took down a gator easily twice your size." Tiny looks at the catch, then

back at Ember. “You need ANYTHING. You let me know. Okay? You or Silver, I'm here for it."

She takes another deep breath, “You *need* a *rebreather*, Em. We don't need you getting sick. That won't do anyone any good."

"Thanks, Tiny." Ember mumbles, eyes locked on the floor. Everything felt like it was getting heavier… and slowly starting to spin…

Tiny lolls her head back again and rolls out her shoulders.

She took another breath, let it out.

She decides to be silly.

She grabs Ember's head under her arm in a choke hold and rubs her knuckles against the top of her head lightly. **"YOU ALMOST GAVE ME A HEART ATTACK, YOU KNOW THAT??"**

This perks Ember up; she giggles and responds, “That’s my *job*! I’m a *kid*!!” Ember keeps giggling as Tiny messes up her already messed-up hair.

Relief mixes with fatigue, then suddenly Ember’s weary eyes light up.

“Did you make the things? Did you? Did you have a chance?” Em is now wiggling gently to get out of Tiny’s gentle choke hold. Tiny chuckles and lets her go.

“Yeah, yeah, I got 'em behind the counter. I was working on them between orders.” She says with a wink. She gets up and returns with the puppy pack for Isaac.

Tiny grabs it from either side and pulls, showing how stretchy the material is. “I made it out of elastic fabric, so it will grow with him; he won’t need a new one until he’s about 6 months old. Then another at one year old, and the one-year-old pack should be his lifelong pack.”

Ember’s eyes light up brighter than they had since she arrived. “It’s *PERFECT*!! But… What about the rebreather?”

Ember looks at Tiny, the light wavering in her eyes.

Tiny took a step back and looked at her. She looked pale.

Fog ended human lives.

Sometimes small amounts of fog could do the same damage as lots of fog, but with a delayed reaction.

Tiny is growing concerned, but she continues the conversation to hide it. "What if I told you he didn't need one?"

Ember looks confused, tired, cautious, then curious. "What do you mean?"

"What if I told you a story, a true story, about the origin of the fog, the chains that bind us all together, and why animals are so rarely affected?" Tiny has a sparkle in her eyes that Ember only saw when Tiny was gossiping.

Ember considers this offer.

She was beginning to feel exhausted.

"Yes. But. Not today. Will you tell me tomorrow? I... uh... I don't feel so good." She leans against the wall, sliding down it to sit on the floor.

Tiny crouches down and puts the back of her hand to Ember's forehead. "Oh, sweetie, you're burning up. Tell me truthfully, what level did you go to, and how long were you there?"

Ember looks at the floor. "Sixteen...? Maybe lower...? the fog was a lot lower than normal today... And... I don't know." Ember rolls her eyes to the ceiling. "The gator was *really* big, and when I cut it up... parts of the tail kept rolling down into the fog... but just a little bit further down each time.... And... oh man, when I first cut the tail off, it went down the whole staircase... getting it back up was hard... and packing it up was slow... I just feel kind of dizzy and really, **really** tired..."

Tiny nods, her face serious.

She stands and considers the risk.

Ember's head lolls to the side as she slumps down the wall towards the floor. It looked like she was going to pass out at any moment.

Tiny nods. The risk was worth it. "Let me get you some tea. You can drink it while I process the gator, and then I'll send you home with more, but you have to promise that you will drink the tea I send you home *tonight*, and that *only you will drink it."*

Ember looks up at Tiny.

It felt like she was seeing things, like there were multiple layers of reality layered on top of each other, especially when she looked at Tiny.

She seemed different, somehow.

Like, there were two of her, and they were superimposed on top of each other.

There was the Tiny she knows and loves, and there was this ethereal, imageless feeling of motherly care that was taking up so much more space than Tiny could possibly take up.

The thought confuses Ember; maybe she really *was* sick.

She should have asked for a rebreather.

Damn insecurity.

She had never gotten fog sick before…

'Am I going to die this time?' she wondered, feeling sleep pulling her under.

Tiny knelt down, picked up Ember, grabbed some blankets and bundled her up and tucked her into her corner, where she sometimes napped during her visits.

Her corner was filled with soft blankets and pillows, and was occasionally turned into a fort.

Then, Tiny made a delicious batch of tea that tasted like strawberries. Almost immediately, Ember's eyes

were too heavy to keep open.

Tiny smoothed out the hair on the top of her head, kissed it lightly, and said, “I’ll be right back.” Knowing full well she was out cold.

Tiny left for a while, locking Isaac and Ember in her level for safety until she returned.

Ember woke hours later to a cold, wet nose touching the bottom of her foot.

She had apparently taken off one shoe and sock while she was asleep; she felt both hot, cold, and very clammy.

Sitting up, Ember found Tiny reading from a book in her soft chair near the middle of the level.

“Evening, kiddo. I was gonna let you sleep for a while longer, but Isaac insisted now was the time. He seems quite worried about you.” Tiny comments, closing her book, and sipping a hot drink from a cup.

Ember blinks at her through a fever-fogged head. Her eyes narrowed as she thought for a moment.

“...you talk to animals,” Ember says, her voice flat. She then nods to herself and begins putting her sock and shoe back on, seemingly unaffected by her conclusion.

Tiny is surprised by this and laughs abruptly. Her laugh is loud and booming, the walls seem to vibrate from the sound, and Ember’s head feel like it’s going to split.

She quickly covers her ears with her hands and throws herself into her nest of blankets.

Tiny stops abruptly, walks across the room, and picks up Ember from where she was lying, cradling her in her arms before sitting down and holding her.

She speaks softly, “No, kiddo. Just body language. He’s anxious. I can only imagine that he’s worried about you.”

She places the tea pouch in Ember’s lap and wraps her in a blanket. “Here, I made your tea. This will fix you right up. Drink it as soon as possible, drink every drop, and don’t share it with *anyone*. Got it? Repeat it back to me, please.”

“Make now, drink all, be

selfish," Ember mumbles as she cuddles into the thick, fluffy blanket.

Tiny chuckled, "Yeah, pretty much." She kisses the top of Ember's head.

Thinking to herself for a moment, she looks around her level, then nods to herself.

Tiny placed Em back in her napping nest and headed to her front door.

She attached Em's hovercart to Tiny's hoverboard, clipped Isaac into the hovercart with his new harness, and loaded up part of her processed meat from her backlog that Tiny had finished processing.

She returned to Em, picked her up, and said, "Alright, kiddo, I don't trust you to drive tonight. Imma hand hand-deliver you."

Tiny opened her front door with everything loaded up, finding Silver, who had just pulled back her hand to knock.

Tiny stands there, barely noticing Buddy off to the side, and raises her eyebrows at Silver.

Silver's eyes widened when Tiny opens the door.

"TINY! Hi!" Silver looks at her raised hand in shock, as though it had grown another head. "I'm not hitting you! I would never hit you! We were just looking for-" Silver then sees Ember in Tiny's arms ***"HOLY SHIT, EMBER, IS SHE OKAY??"***

Silver immediately wraps her arms around Tiny's arms, cradling Ember princess style.

Silver looks up at Tiny, her face threatening tears.

Tiny smiles softly and melts her arms away, placing Ember lovingly into Silver's arms.

"She's going to be okay.

Dumb kid went way too close to the fog without a rebreather. She said she ran out and was afraid to ask for more." Tiny brushes some of Em's hair off her forehead.

"Told her she gets as many as she needs free of charge, all the work she does for me." She unwraps the blanket slightly and pulls out her tea.

"Here, here's some tea, **just** for her. Make this for her tonight. Immediately. **Just** for her, and make sure that **she, only she, drinks *every drop*.**

"Follow those instructions and she'll be right as sunshine tomorrow." Tiny tussled Ember's messy hair.

She then realized how messy it was beginning to get and attempted to smooth it out, looking concerned.

"Gotta… figure out what to do about this… mess of hair… We could cut it again." Tiny pulls out one tight curl to its full length, lets it go.

Then she looks up at Silver and pulls on one of her loose orange red curls, mumbling, "Mmmm. Yours looks okay… ish… for now. Shoulder length is nice on you." She makes a face, "Mmmm… Chin length would probably look better, though… with layers…" She turns her attention back to Em, smoothing her hair again.

"It could be so beautiful, but she needs to… what do I need to get for her so she can maintain this…? Dez would know… she tells me what to get for her, but… Dez's look looser than Em's… *and* I don't know how to use any of it…" Tiny muses as she pulls another curl out from the wadded mess of hair on Ember's head and rubs it between her fingers softly as she talks. "It's so *dry*…"

Realizing she's gotten off track, she stands straight and clears her throat. "Her game from last hunt is in her cart, as well as extra for Isaac's dinner. Her hunt from today was, frankly, huge. Not even half the meat would fit in one cartload, even after processing, so you will need

to plan for that, or let it span out over a few days. She doesn't need to work tomorrow; she just needs to get better."

Tiny finally looks up from Ember, seeing Silver's face is an absolute mess.

Her eyes are locked on Tiny, her bottom lip is pulled all the way up, her nose is running, and she's actively crying despite trying not to.

Her voice is high and tight when she speaks, like she is attempting and failing to hold back a flood of emotions.

"*Thank you so much, Tiny. I don't know what we would do without you. I don't know how to process food. I don't know how to cure sickness. I don't know jack shit. I love you so much, I love that you love her so much. She needs you so much, thank you, thank you, thank you."* Silver whimpers, stepping forward and leaning into Tiny as she talks.

Silver has put her forehead on Tiny's chest and has decayed into incoherent blubbering while bouncing Ember like she's a baby.

Ember seems to say something, catching the attention of both Tiny and Silver.

"Stay with me, Isaac. I love you, good boy."

As Tiny closed the door to her level, Silver shifted Ember to make her easier to carry.

She shifted Em from princess style to resting her head on Silver's shoulder. Silver shifted Em's lower body to be able to carry her on her hip, the way she had when she first found Em.

It had been so long since she had carried her like this.

She kissed the top of her head as she cherished the memories of her holding Em through the years.

My, how she's grown.

Buddy held the blanket while Silver shifted Em, and quickly covered the shivering Em once she was settled.

While Silver comforted Em, Buddy clipped together Ember and Silver's gear, attaching Ember's board to the top of Silver's, which would give it enough power to carry them both.

He also attached Ember's cart to Silver's board, making sure Isaac was stowed safely inside.

When he saw the new harness and clip, he made sure all the clips were clipped and ready for the ride.

They flew back to their shelter, Buddy letting Silver set the pace, since she was carrying precious cargo.

When they arrived at the shelter, Buddy immediately set up and lit the fire in the doorway, gathered the water, and began to brew Ember's tea.

Silver lay Em on Silver's bed while she fussed with Ember's bed, smoothing out the bottles so there would be as few lumps as possible.

Silver was so grateful for Ember's idea about the beds.

The beds were one of the first game-changing ideas Ember had had when she first started living with Silver.

The thought was that air

heats up faster than concrete, and so does plastic. So, if they use vines to tie a bunch of plastic bottles together into a mattress, that should help keep them warm and also be a little softer than sleeping right on the concrete.

Some people slept by gathering vines and sleeping on them when they were freshly cut.

But that meant they were wet, they smelled, and you had to constantly replace them.

Instead of drying out the vines into something you could burn, they became moldy, slimy and extra gross if you left them in a pile on the floor for too long.

Silver grimaced at her memories of sleeping in damp, stinky, lumpy and poke-y piles before Ember had shown up.

Silver hadn't told her so, but Ember tended to be right more often than not.

After Silver finished making Ember's bed as soft as she could make it, she lay her down and covered up the shivering Ember with both Ember's blanket and Silver's blanket.

When Buddy came over with a cup of Ember's tea, Silver roused Ember, helped her sit up, and made sure she drank all of it.

Silver handed Buddy the empty cup, and Buddy stared at it with a strange intensity.

He stared into the cup, looking at the drops that were clinging to the walls of the cup.

The words "drink every drop" were playing in his head.

Maybe she really meant it?

"Hold on, don't put her down yet." He says as he gets up and goes to the water jug, pours some water into the cup, and swirls the water around the cup, making sure to catch all of the drops.

They repeat this process two

more times, and while Buddy is getting back up to refill the cup yet again, Ember groaned, complaining, “Seriously, guys? I’m gonna pee the bed if you make me drink any more.”

They both chuckle, and Silver tucks Ember in for the night, kissing her on the forehead and lifting up the blanket to offer to Isaac.

Silver thought offering Isaac a way under the blankets would be helpful, if he wanted to sleep next to Ember, but he seemed content to chew on the vine Ember had given him earlier instead of baking to death under two blankets next to a feverish child.

As soon as Ember was asleep, Silver felt immense relief, followed by intense awkwardness.

She suddenly became very aware of Buddy’s presence, the fact that she had no blanket, and that this was the beginning of him moving in with them.

‘It’ll be fine. He’s slept over plenty of times; this will be just like that. Except… for, forever.’ She thought as she turned to look at him, finding him staring at her as well.

While she was feeling fear bordering on panic, his face was warm and shy, holding a slight smile.

God, stop looking at his smile.

Together, they quickly divided up the chores and got ready for the next day.

When everything was done and the shelter was packed up, Silver’s mind wandered back to the blanket situation. At the same time, Buddy draped a blanket over her shoulders.

Standing behind her, he said softly, “You look like you need an extra. I never had an Ember of my own to come up with the mattress solution, so instead I stole blankets from void nests and, after washing

them, used them to keep warm."

He softly laid his head on top of hers, considered kissing her cheek, decided he valued his life, and sat against the wall facing the fire to settle in for the night.

Buddy slept sitting against the wall the first night.

Ember was awake before the sun rose and woke the rest of the shelter by yelling "***///T's MORNING TIME!!"*** and throwing both blankets off of her with such force that they flew across the room and landed on the counter by her workbench.

Buddy's eyes shoot open, and seeing Em's energy, he smiles.

Silver, however, groans from her bed a weary "yaaayyyyy... why the fuk are we up so damn early... I mean, good morning honey, I'm so glad it sounds like you're feeling better."

Ember gets up from her bed and starts running laps around the shelter as she plays with Isaac.

In synch, Buddy and Silver look at her and say, "What... the Fuck?"

Ember's skin had changed overnight. Her skin had been a solid milk chocolate all over, decorated with thin black lines crisscrossing over her body.

Now, below her knees and elbows looked like they were dipped into a rich blue black, that was speckled with white dots that seemed to be moving on her skin like stars across the night sky.

The blue-black smoothly transitioned into her normal skin, but the black lines that had crisscrossed her body had turned a vibrant gold, leaving thin crisscross patterns of gold, unevenly and asymmetrically tattooed on her.

As Ember turned to look at them, she asked, "What?"

Silver looked at Buddy, then back to Ember, “Uhhm… wanna play tic-tac-toe?” then points at her arm, indicating for Ember to look at her arm.

“What do you mean – What the Fuck.” Ember’s jaw drops and her eyes pop open. She then gives herself a once-over, spinning in a circle, trying to see as much of herself as she can. She then says, “I need to go to Tiny’s!”

“*Yeah*, you do…” Silver muses, eyes wide and unblinking as she muses over the change.

“Wait- why do *you* say that? Tiny has a mirror, that’s what *I* mean, what do *you* mean? Did you do this? Did *Tiny* do this?” She stops and laughs, “If so, that’s *awesome.”* She says, laughing.

Ember was talking fast, and as she talked, she began to tear the place up looking for something. “Where’s my **BOARD?**” She whined, loud and annoyed.

Buddy, still in shock, pointed to Silver’s board and said, “Clipped.”

“Kay, thanks, *~BYEEE~”* She sings as she unclips her board and cart, grabs Isaac, who is immediately sniffing her, realizing that she is, in fact, a little different.

Ember straps him in, and takes off.

“Uh… Byee…?” Says Silver, to an empty doorway. She looks at Buddy. “What the fuck…?”

“Was in that tea…?” He finishes.

As Ember takes off hoverboarding directly out of the shelter and off to Tiny's, her heart is pounding, and she notices that she's filled with so much energy.

The world seems different; it feels brighter, yet less intense.

The feeling inside her began to take shape, and somehow it felt like she could now begin to bend life to her will instead of constantly being battered against the rocks by this crappy life.

She gets to Tiny's level, finding the window left open for her water collection, and instead of knocking, she lies flat on her hoverboard and flies right inside.

Once inside, she jumps off her hoverboard, intentionally landing hard on the floor and yelling, "TA-DA!!!"

"WHO THE FUCK?"

Tiny shouts as her feet hit the floor; footsteps immediately begin to thud in Ember's direction.

When Ember's voice processes, you hear it in Tiny's reaction, as her steps slow and shift from stomping to walking and follows up with "Oh. Shit. Jesus kiddo, scared the living shit out of me."

She begins speaking before entering the room, "Are you feeling better? Aaaaaaaahem." She says as she rounds the corner and gets her first look at Ember.

She pauses for a moment as she thinks, her eyes wide, lips tight. She nods. "Okay, I'm glad it worked. And you drank every drop. People don't… usually… take that part… literally."

She nods to herself, "Good, though, we can work with this." She says, nodding, while she gestures a finger up and down over Ember as she says 'this'.

Ember cocks her head as Tiny is talking, growing increasingly confused.

After a bit, she stops listening

entirely.

When Tiny stops talking, Ember shoots both of her arms in front of her and asks, “I’m different. Why am I different? Also – I’m shiny?” she asks as she rotates her arms back and forth, showing off the new gold patterns.

Tiny stares at Ember’s arms for a few heartbeats too long.

She then takes a deep breath, whistles, and says, “Couldn’t tell ya kid, but it looks good on you! Wanna go use the mirror to check it out?”

Ember bounces with excitement, “Hell yeah, I do!” as she runs to the mirror and giggles incessantly.

Tiny’s lips are pressed tight together, her eyes stare past the floor and out into nothingness as they remain wide and unblinking.

Her lips are pressed tightly together, and her eyebrows are all the way up.

She slowly begins shaking her head back and forth while staring at the ground, her eyes locked on the far off nothingness.

After a few seconds, she blows air out through her lips and slowly shakes her head. And says to herself, “Choices, choices…”

She then gathers herself and moves to the kitchen while Em examines herself in the mirror.

“Hey, kid, you eat breakfast yet, or did you skip that and speed right over here?” she hollers as she moves back into the kitchen.

“I could eat!” Ember replies, still glued to the mirror.

“Kid, you’re like 50 pounds, you better eat.” Tiny replies as Em giggles.

As they settled in at the table to eat a breakfast of cured meat, strawberries, and a new thing, it was orange and pointy.

Tiny called it a carrot.

Ember wasn't sure how she felt about it, but the variety was nice.

"Don't worry about working today, kiddo, just rest and recover, okay?" Tiny says as they begin to eat breakfast.

Em gives her the side eye. "I'm not sure I *believe* you."

Tiny chuckles, "What do you mean?"

Ember insists, "Well... If you meant that, why was my window open?"

Tiny's eyebrows go up, and she thinks for a second. "Yeah, it was, wasn't it. Habit, I guess." She says, shrugging and chuckling. "I expected you to come by *sometime* today, but not this early, and not quite so... animated." She eyes Em as she mulls over the word 'animated'.

Ember stares back at her, silently chewing the new 'carrot'. "This is weird."

Tiny blinks at her for a second, realizes the means the carrot, and laughs, saying, "Eat your damn veggies, kid."

"Ok-ayy, but I'm still gonna work after this, if I don't, I'll be bored out my gourd," Em says as she lolls her head from one side to the other.

She suddenly sits upright, points her carrot at Tiny, and shouts, "I'LL MAKE YOU A DEAL!!"

Tiny stares at Em with eyes wide and eyebrows up, taking a bite of her own carrot before slightly nodding her head towards Em as if to say, "Yeah, okay, what you got?"

"Gimmie everything I need everything for an experiment, and I'll spend today doing nothing but that." Em then sits back and crosses her arms, looking smug.

Tiny grabs a carrot off the serving plate and offers it as a hand to shake with Em, saying, "Deal."

Em's experiments rarely went

badly, and Tiny's inherent risk of buying into the projects early paid out phenomenally.

Usually.

Em shakes the carrot hand, then finds herself the owner of two carrots to eat by the end of breakfast.

She leans back and crosses her arms, pouting.

While pouting, Em's mind begins to drift.

She then sticks out her bottom lip, head lolling to one side, she rights her head while her brow furrows, looks at Tiny, and asks, "What's a Demigod?"

This surprises Tiny; her eyebrows shoot down, then turns her head so one ear is tilted towards Em and her head dips forward as it moves towards her. She asks, "A... What?"

Em just stares at her and blinks, sure she didn't stutter or misspeak.

Tiny gives a mouth shrug and nods her head, "Okay, I'll tell you, then you tell me where you heard that, deal?"

"Deal."

"Damn." Tiny leans back in her chair, crossing her arms. "How do I begin.

"First, there were humans.

"Then there were Gods.

"The Gods began to exist because humans were finding enlightenment and were being elevated into a different state of being.

"The Gods were there to guide other humans as best as they could to their own paths of enlightenment.

"The humans worshiped the Gods.

"Then some of the humans began to worship other humans.

"Worship is key to giving a God their power, so naturally, the worship began to give these humans some power.

"They were elevated to a

higher level of being. But without divine intervention, they would never be able to reach a Godly status.

“Without that intervention, they were left somewhere in between the two states of being. Having longer life spans and additional powers.

“But when you compare the three, you get an analogy similar to worker ants, queen ants, and humans.

“The humans and Demigods are like worker ants and queen ants, where the Gods are the humans in this analogy.

“Now, your turn. Where did you hear that?” Tiny turns her attention to the child and locks in.

“When I was collecting vines the other day, on level 55, around the southeast side, I heard some teens talking about it.” Ember intentionally left out major parts.

Tiny was watching her closely and saw that she was avoiding looking at her. “Mhm, what were these teens doing?”

“Coughing, giggling, talking shit.” Em shrugged. “Normal teen shit.” She poked at her carrot, pushing it around her plate.

Tiny sighed.

Giggling and coughing could only mean void, and so close to their shelter, too. “I’m gonna get you guys a door someday soon.” She said, rubbing her eyes. “What were they talking about, *specifically*?”

What Demigod do I have to worry about?

Please tell me the kiddo paid attention to that.

“They said that they were called a bArd or maybe a bird?” Em looked at Tiny, seeing if she got the word right.

Tiny nodded for her to continue. Bard narrowed it down a little.

“They said his name, but I think I forgot. He’s supposed to be broke? But if he’s a God, how can a God be broke?”

“A Demigod is not a God.” Tiny corrected, gently.

“Oh, yeah, right. Weird…” Ember mulled over this new information.

Broke. That could mean a few things. “Did they say how to summon them?”

“Yeah! Thanks, I forgot. Wait, how did you know they could be summoned? They said:

“First you punch them in the kidney, then you BOP ‘em in the face, then you go ‘whap, whap, whap, whap, whap, whap’ but you have to use both hands…?” Ember stood and demonstrated her significant lack of fighting skills while telling the summoning ritual.

Bibi No Credits. Had to be. Okay, that could be okay. Good, even.

Relief flooded Tiny as she took a drink of her water, watching the kid fake a sword fight with her carrot.

Em flopped back in her chair. “Does it… like, *work,* though? Like for realizes?” Em stared at Tiny, her eyes wide and hopeful.

She badly wanted magic to exist.

Tiny couldn’t help but smile.

Tiny’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “Did you wanna *try it?* Fuck around, find out? It’s just a *Demigod,* after all.”

Em nibbled on her carrot, debating. She wondered how much trouble this could lead to.

Chapter 6

After Em shot out of their shelter, Buddy and Silver took some time to recover before doing their morning chores and getting ready to meet with Desiree and Gary.

Arriving outside the recruitment zone, Silver and Buddy find Desiree and Gary already waiting for them.

“Mid-day is a little… late? Don’t you think?” Desiree says, slumped against the wall. “I’m ready for my afternoon nap already with all this…” she waves her hand at the wrist as she thinks, “lack of activity.”

Silver tenses, still carrying tension from their argument several jobs ago.

She smiles a tight smile. “Sorry about that, we didn’t know your normal schedule, so we wanted to play it safe. How about next time you guys set the time? Would that be okay?”

Buddy raises his eyebrows and looks at Silver, wondering if she would sprout a second head to match her second personality.

Desiree raised her eyebrows, looking surprised, as though she had been expecting a fight.

She pursed her lips as she thought about this, then nodded and said, “Okay, yeah, that works with me.”

Silver continues smiling and nods before explaining, “Today’s job will be mostly cleanup of a job that barely counted as a success last time.

“Previously, our team of three men joined at their meeting position on the 75th floor.

“Our assignment was, at that time, to assess the northwest quadrant of the 80th to 90th floors, doing recon only.

“On level 81, our third man split from our team and proceeded to run around each of the levels, making a

lot of unnecessary noise.

“We found this member of the team on level 84, unloading a *machine gun* into an *extremely large* mass of void. The void immediately ate him, and we fled.

“The void pursued us, and in its pursuit, it split the floor of level 84 in half, dropping us into level 83.

“Speculation is that many of the levels between 80 and 85 may have suffered structural damage due to the ease with which the void was able to cause such significant damage during this chase.

“Clearing up the speculation will be our assignment; however, due to the amount of damage that was done, we are to assess the surrounding area as well. To be thorough.” Silver finishes.

Desiree smirks, “In other words, you pissed off Cappy.”

Buddy stifles a laugh while Silver scoffs and tries not to gag at the nickname. “*Yeah*. Fukkn daily, bro. Who doesn’t?”

Silver continues, “That was last time, this time, our job is:

“Three days. Four people. Levels 75 through 100. Twenty-five levels. Three times the amount of normal credits, but only to those who all give the same report.

“Also, the job needs to be completed in 3 days. Twenty-five levels, three days, four people, twenty-five credits per person, per level.” She recaps.

She then lightens the mood by pretending to be the Captain:

“Recon only. Tell me where the void is, anything else I need to know, and this time don’t make me send you back out again to double check yourself!”

This gets a contemptuous smirk out of Gary and a nose wrinkle out of Desiree.

Silver clears her throat at her

failed attempt and confirms with the group, “Everyone on board?”

Gary agrees by nodding and shrugging, but Desiree is more thorough; she repeats back to them the job:

“25 credits per person, per floor, for whoever makes it back and is able to file a report that matches the others’.”

Desiree looks thoughtful, “I have an idea. From what you said, Cappy didn’t say anything about us clearing the levels *together*.

“What if we split the levels 4 ways, and met up at the end of each day to sync up our reports?

“As long as we make sure to label each level we gather a report on, and at the end, we organize them into one full report that we all write out together, each of us with our own copies that we build from each individual report. That way, we will have reports that sound the same but are still unique to the individual.” Desiree suggests to the group.

Silver and Buddy are nodding, impressed by this idea.

Gary is smiling at Desiree and says, “That’s my girl. Brains for days.” He moves in to kiss her temple, but she waves him off, putting her fingers to her lips, thinking.

Desiree continues, “26 levels, 4 people,”

Silver interrupts her, “Captain said 25 levels, 75 to 100?”

Dez scoffs and rolls her eyes, “Yeah, we all know that was a fucking lie. He likes to leave out the extra level. If we don’t include that we cleared both levels 75 and 100, we would get docked pay *and* reprimanded.

“But, if we include them as part of the report, we can demand the extra pay for the level, as it was included in the original deal.” She smiles, angry.

The group is quiet as they process this strategy.

“Damn Desiree,” Silver says, exhaling and breaking the silence. “Fuckin ball buster energy. I’m into it.” She says, beginning to smile as well.

Buddy looks at Silver, slightly concerned, then looks at Deziree as she continues talking.

She continues “So that’ll be 6 levels per person with two left over, if we do 1 level today since we’re getting started late,” she shoots a look at Silver, “Clear 3 levels tomorrow if we start at dawn, then the last 2 of our individual levels day after and meet at the top, once we’re all there we go somewhere to finalize the report.”

Buddy and Silver are staring at Desiree in awe. They didn’t know anything about math, be it quick math or practical math.

Silver and Buddy talk simultaneously, “Holy Fuck.” “She’s Scary.”

“It’s better to be coordinated than confused.” Desiree says with a shrug, “Also, call me Dez, Desiree is too damn long.”

“Okay, yeah, whatever you say, Big Boss Dez,” Silver says, smiling widely. She was glad their tension was behind them.

“Who takes which levels?” Buddy interjects thoughtfully.

Desiree thinks for a second, then slowly says, “From bottom to top, Silver, 75 through 80, Buddy, 81 through 86, Gary, 87 through 92, me, 93 through 98. Then we can do 99 and 100 together, unless someone finishes early. Does that work for everyone? That way we stay close to our partners-”

Silver begins to look panicked and takes a breath to interject before Buddy elbows her and whispers, “Not like that.”

Dez eyes them before continuing, “I see you two on the sign-up sheet for levels

70-80 pretty often, and we try to stay in the 100+ levels for the double payout, so that just seems like it'll work best, in my opinion."

That meant they were part of the crew taking on the deadliest jobs the Tower had to throw at you. And that was their normal.

In levels above 100, it was made of shipping containers. The void had a tendency to appear as thin as paint, coating the rusty metal and giving the illusion it was merely shadow until you were close enough to consume.

When you combined the sneak attacks with the lack of oxygen, which made evasion and escape all the more difficult, you ended up with a much lower survival rate.

Nobody went that high up unless they were getting paid and paid *well*.

Buddy thought about this before he spoke, "That makes the most sense to me, too." When he looked over at Silver, it seemed she was more struck by the news than he was and was still attempting to recover.

Silver stumbled as she spoke, "yeah–no–wow–I mean–that's great–100–wow, just, *jesus*, got any tips?" Then she devolved into laughing uncomfortably.

Dez stares at Silver a few heartbeats too long, then claps and says, "Oh-*kay*! Everyone ready to go? When we're done, meet back here at the statue on level 70. We'll go from there."

Day one of the mission was relatively uneventful. They flew directly up the Tower and split off at their assigned levels.

As Silver got started, she decided to be thorough when clearing level 75, since she had the whole afternoon to do so.

She had been all over level 75 during her time clearing the void with Buddy, but this time, slowly and methodically clearing the level, she noticed something she hadn't seen before.

There was a corner of the level that was inaccessible from the inside, and to get to it from the outside, it would require going far out of your way to get to it.

Cleaning was paid by the job, not the time it took to do the job, so it made sense that she would have overlooked this rubble-filled corner.

But this time, with less demand on her time and in full sunlight, she started to notice some strange things. The walls were intact. The rubble in the surrounding area had been cleared and seemingly placed up against the walls to make the solid and structurally sound room look like a decaying corner.

It wasn't 'locked' per se, as there was no door, just two walls coming to a corner with rubble piled onto them, making them look like gentle slopes.

The walls that led to the outside next to the room were large enough to poke her head out of, and in doing so, she saw that the room was open on the outside.

But all of the other walls of this level were intact; so much that a human couldn't fit through the holes in them. Mmm. Well. Maybe Ember could. She was unreasonably tiny.

Silver smiled thinking how Ember might freak out when her floof of hair might touch the walls if she were to try to

poke her head through.

To get into this room, she would have to go all the way back to the entrance on the other corner of the level and fly around.

What a pain.

When she got back to the room, this time on the outside, she was shocked and relieved. She didn't know who she was saying 'thank you' to, but she said a silent 'thank you' because she was the one assigned this level.

She had stumbled across a tiny garden.

The room had bins and bins of dirt, which is extremely illegal, death sentence illegal, because of how heavy it is in bulk.

There were several trees, some bearing fruit, some with flowers. And small green piles growing out of buckets of dirt, the green things were growing something... ***strawberries***!

She had found where Ember was getting the strawberries from, the ones that Silver would find in her pockets now and then when washing her clothes.

She shifted her stance on her board, thinking.

'This must be Tiny's garden...'

She nodded to herself.

'Which, of course, means I touch nothing and tell nobody,' she thought before heading back to the entrance of the level to write her report on level 75.

A few levels up, Buddy was heading into level 81. He flew up and into the level without hesitation.

Silver and Buddy maintained this level fairly regularly, so he was familiar with this area.

He did an immediate scan of the level as he entered, finding nothing, as usual.

He wondered if getting the next level done today would be a good idea.

On the direct opposite side of the entrance was the largest rubble pile on the level.

The rubble was piled at a steep 45 degree angle. He had thought to himself that if it were made of any kind of soft material, someone would almost consider sleeping on it.

... Almost.

Buddy and Silver had used these large rubble piles as landmarks within the levels.

They weren't on every level, but they were on some of them, and they tended to be directly diagonally from the entrance.

Probably a testament to the lack of care that was used when assembling the Tower.

The same Tower that they would never be able to leave.

By the time he got to the rubble pile, he had made his decision. Better to clear as much as possible as soon as possible.

He pulled a sharp U-turn and immediately flew to level 82.

On level 82, he noticed a lack of void.

The last time they had been near this level, there were masses of void sprawling the area.

Passing by a set of rooms, he noted that two had void cocoons, and one of the rooms was blossoming.

Blossoming void shoots tendrils around the room, attaching around the walls and sprouting orbs of the

drug in the tendrils, designed to lure in victims.

He continued flying in the uneasy silence, coming to an abrupt halt when he heard groaning.

Hoverboards weren't necessarily quiet, but they were quieter than walking. The main reason he would bother walking these levels is because Silver has 'restless legs' and needed to pace constantly.

She'd make up any excuse to walk around.

He slows his board, trying to reduce noise further, although he wasn't sure it was necessary.

If the noise came from a void user, they wouldn't notice a brick to the face, let alone somebody passing by.

A void user it was.

Collapsed in the corner, sleeping deeply, or possibly in a coma. An adult man lay slumped against the wall, and the center of his shirt was black and slimy.

The first stages of decay were setting in.

He had less than 24 hours until he was a cocoon.

24 long, painful hours, where all he would be able to do would be to sit, and rot.

Buddy pulled out his report sheet, filled in the section as a cocoon area, and moved on.

As he turned to leave, he heard footsteps.

Killing the engine on his board, he lowered to the ground, flipped the kickstand on the board, and waited, listening for movement.

Across the level, he saw a familiar form disappearing into one of the rooms he had checked previously.

The one with the blossoming void.

Buddy flicked on his board again and flew closer as silently as he could. Stopping around the corner, he waited

for the dealer to come out with his haul, hoping to be able to identify him.

Inside the room, there was some clattering, a muffled clinking of glass bottled being knocked about in a container.

Humming.

Someone was saying something; they sounded satisfied.

A zipper pull.

Rustling.

Footsteps.

Buddy pressed himself against the wall.

When the person exited the room, their back would be to him. If they turned left, Buddy would be crouched to their right, behind some rubble.

Hopefully, they wouldn't see him.

There was only one entrance/exit, to this level, after all.

They would have to turn left if they were aiming to leave.

As the drug collector exited the room, Buddy immediately knew him.

It was Skit.

He paused at the doorway, staring straight ahead at nothing for two full seconds.

He then abruptly turned left and walked away, whistling.

Buddy was holding his breath, and as Skit exited the level he finally let it out.

His heart was racing, and he took a few moments to calm himself before pulling his report sheet out once more and filled in the remaining details.

Further up, Gary was clearing level 87. The first thing he noticed was that most of the walls were missing their concrete, and what was left behind was the supporting metal beams, sunlight, and a field of plastic tarps hung up at roughly a 45-degree angle, all funneling into small square buckets. Next to these buckets are several bottles, which are unusually clean, with different colors of tape wrapped around them.

Looking into the buckets, he found them all to have at least two bottles worth of water in them.

Finding himself a little thirsty, he filled a bottle, tasted it, and noticed it was cleaner than the water he was used to being able to find.

He filled a bottle for him and for Dez before he finished clearing the level.

Gary returns to level 70 to write his report, sure he's beaten everyone by clearing his level, only to see Silver already waiting at the meeting spot.

Since he writes better alone, he stops and writes his report for the level, then proceeds to wait with Silver for the remainder of the crew.

Dez reached level 93, and finding herself in unfamiliar territory, she was a bit on edge. Everything seemed clear, so she entered the level. She slowly and methodically scanned through the center of the level, confirming it still appeared empty, then she began to approach the rooms that lined the perimeter.

Each room she passed by was clear, and her mind began to wander. She couldn't help but feel conflicted about her new teammates.

Silver had a... bit of a reputation.

She was a hothead, impulsive, and chaotic.

She also went toe to toe 1v1 against most of the Tower when the bounty was still up for kiddos.

She singlehandedly reduced the Tower's population by at least twenty-five.

People stopped counting after that, because that was when Cappy got serious.

Dez herself had a memory of seeing Silver during this time.

Silver had made a special backpack out of straps and always carried the 6-year-old Ember around on her back, still always with that stupid duffel.

Dez remembered seeing six-year-old Ember strapped to Silver, facing backward to be able to always watch her back.

Silver had found an old helmet for Em and had her wear it at all times. She had also found a fireproof blanket for the child to wear as a blanket to keep her safe.

During this time, Silver always wore two large Bowie knives strapped upside down to each bicep; she had thick, rectangular, hand-sized metal grips that she carried in each of her pockets.

She was also known for wrapping chains around each

of her arms, padlocking the chains tight so they would stay on, using them for their weight.

With the void, Silver now used the custom flamethrower Ember had made her.

But with people, she was an up-close and personal fighter.

She wanted you to look her in the eye and have an opportunity to change your mind while you were making your mistake.

The enforcers were supposed to *take care* of the children, you see.

And they did, for a while.

But they got tired of giving them the supplies the enforcers believed *they* deserved.

Supplies that were sometimes better than the ones they were receiving.

The only orders they had were to 'take care' of them, so Cappy decided it was time to interpret that differently.

He issued a bounty for any child that was without a family.

Sometimes this required proof, sometimes it required signatures from the parents saying they had been *taking care* of the kid, but the kid wasn't *theirs*, exactly.

This was a trick, you see.

Families don't exist anymore.

Blood lines are lies.

The void had long since ripped apart any strong blood ties and left people grouping together based on who survived best together.

Blood lines were only still considered to be a thing because of the perks people assumed you had based on them.

But the truth was, nobody really knew.

The bounty was small at first. When the children were easy to find.

In the nurseries and the daycares that were run by the enforcers or by other children.

With the animal tenders on the lower levels, getting milk.

The more people resisted, hid their children, tried to save the ones they loved, the higher the bounty got.

The more resources vanished in the General Store, the more desperate people were.

Long ago, before Tiny had shown up, the people had relied on an enforcer-run shop to get everything they needed.

Technically, the shop still exists, but the price was 5 million credits paid in cash for a bottle of water, the last time Dez had thought to ask.

The resource pool shrank, prices skyrocketed, and suddenly the only way you could get enough water to survive was to hunt children.

They didn't care about the state of the child you turned over; they were going to throw them over the edge anyway.

Many adults stood up to this bounty.

All but one disappeared.

Silver alone remained standing.

Living proof that it's not the size of the dog in the fight but the size of the fight in the dog.

Cappy kept doubling down, doubling the bounty over and over, and finally sending enforcers themselves after her.

The war only ended when the enforcers showed up with their hovercars, which only came out during desperate times.

The hovercars were equipped with large flame throwers, fire bomb launchers, and built in pepper spray canisters for 'crowd control'.

The hovercars are supposed to be high-tech, straight from Mars, and only to be used as

a last resort.

Nobody really knows how, but somehow Silver and Ember ended up in a hovercar.

There was a struggle, then a body fell out of the car.

Everything was still.

Until the lights on the hovercar started to flicker, the hovercar dipped and bounced, then after a few tense seconds, everything seemed normal… ish.

Until the hovercar started drifting slowly.

It was being steered back and forth, left and right, but there was no acceleration. No breaking.

It was like someone had the steering wheel but not the pedals.

There was more movement inside the hovercar.

Then all hell broke loose.

The enforcers didn't get new hovercars for over a year.

After the children were gone, it became impossible for anyone to have a kid anymore.
Even when they wanted to.

Even when people emotionally recovered enough to start trying to have kids, they found they were unable to carry the child to full term successfully.

There were rumors that Tiny could help with this, but they were just rumors.

Tiny also initiated something called the 'Standard Deal'.

Known as s^D [3]to the people of the Tower.

Anyone who began talking about things like the s^D got disappeared pretty quickly.

Dez bit her lower lip, trying to stop tears from welling up. She should have fought.

She should have joined with Silver to protect the children instead of hiding with Gary, his family and his siblings.

She shamed herself for choosing them. For choosing to keep them safe and hidden and waiting for it to be over.

She was the reason Cappy wore an eyepatch; she could have done something, anything.

Shame turned to anger.

She clenched her fists and her teeth, angry with herself.

Anger turned to sadness.

Maybe she *should* disappear. Not even take the deal, just hop over the ledge and fall.

Would she tell Gary?

He would try to come with her.

Gary...

They could always... leave together?

She rubbed her arm... she needed him.

She blindly flew out of the level, tears flowing from her eyes.

As she left, she marked it as clear.

What was Cappy going to do, go check?

[3] sD: to all my nerdy ABA people out there struggling to understand sD (discriminative stimulus). Tiny being on the Tower signals that the standard deal, the SD, is available. The discriminative stimulus is Tiny being there. The thing people may or may not want is the standard deal. Get it? Got it? Good. This example helped me so much lmao.

Fucking Asshole.

As Dez flies out of the level, she looks up, trying to slow the tears.

She hugged herself around the waist, squeezing tight.

She needed a hug...

Taking a deep breath and letting it out, she decided to do another level to give her emotions time to recover.

May as well go to the next level while we're here. Don't want them to see me getting all *girly*.

She sniffles and wipes her nose as she flies up to level 94.

As Dez flies up to the next level, she gets a sinking feeling.

Stopping at the entryway outside of the level, she notices that it seems darker than it should.

A classic sign of a void.

She surveys the outside of the level, she peeks in the entrance.

All she can see inside the level is shadows, mixed with inky, reflective black.

She doesn't dare enter. Void is either lining the walls or filling the whole level.

Either way, this was more void in one place than she had ever seen before.

She wrote a quick report and descended to find Gary.

She needed a hug.

Dez gives her board a steep angle and speeds towards the meeting spot, coming in fast and jumping off when she gets close enough to the ground, aiming to tackle Gary.

Garys ears perk up as he hears Dez's board incoming quickly.

He turns, used to this type of glomping.

He catches her midair as she dives from her board and launches herself at him, holding on in a tight hug.

She held on to him for longer than he expected her to, so he made a point to not be the first one to let go.

Her board made uncomfortable whining noises as it finished powering down against the wall it had crashed into.

Buddy was staring at her board, “How… uh… how often do you do that, Dez?”

Gary laughs, and Dez smacks her fists against his back.

Buddy looks back at her board, wondering what modifications Tiny had made to it. They were different than Silver’s, that’s for sure.

As he thought this, Silver drifted back into the meeting area, having made a trip to another level for a bathroom break.

Seeing them glued together, she says, “Jeez, what did I miss?”

Buddy startles, having been lost in thought. He turns to face her, then looks down and stares at her board for a second.

Looking back up at her, he shrugs.

Silver blinks at him and responds with “Oh-kayy. How about we finalize the reports at our shelter? It’s getting close to dinner, and I need to make sure Em’s taken care of.”

Desiree nods her head vigorously against Gary’s chest, and Gary shrugs and nods. The four gather their boards and head back to level 50 towards their shelter.

As the shelter comes into view, something is thrown off the side of the level, followed by a moderate explosion.

Silver’s eyes open wide, the hairs on her whole body stand up as panic surges through her entire being.

She kneels onto her board, grabs a handle on the nose with one hand, pulls the ripcord underneath the nose with the other hand, and the

single thruster under her board ignites and shoots her forward.

She is now being dragged by the board, one hand on the handle, and straining to reach forward with the other hand, needing two hands to be able to steer as her body trails behind the rocket propelled board.

Silver is arcing the corner in less than two seconds, both hands on the handle. She pulls the ripcord again, the thruster shuts off, and she manages to arc the board around the building to their entrance.

She dives off the board, which flies into the empty room next to their shelter, and Silver hits the ground, rolling to disperse momentum.

She slams against the doorway.

Getting up slowly and holding her ribs, out of breath from her arrival, she rushes to her feet, using the wall frame for support, and begins to frantically look around the room for Ember.

Who is frozen in place, her back pressed to her counter workbench, holding some tools in one hand, holding the counter with the other hand, looking shocked, Isaac standing guard in front of her with his fur as upright as Silver's arm hair was.

Together, they look at each other and say, "What, the fuck."

Chapter 7

Ember was flying back to their shelter from Tiny's level, thinking about what she had seen.

Maybe she really could recreate the instructions?

Tiny was confident in her.

But as always, Tiny was more confident than she was.

Speaking of confidence, her thoughts turned to the supplies she had borrowed that now weighed down her mini-duffel and filled her cart.

To make this work, she would have to find a way to spin the flint against the steel while contained inside the ball.

But first, she would need to drill a hole in the ball and fill it with boom powder.

But instead of straight boom powder, she was going to mix the boom powder with salt, a creation similar to Silver's weapon.

The one that gave Silver her name.

When Silver first found Ember, she was cold and alone, hiding in a room down by the fog.

She didn't know how else to stay safe from all the humans in the Tower except to stay near what they were afraid of.

And since she was less afraid of enforcers at that time than she was of the adults, it made sense.

Ember didn't remember having a name at this point; she only remembered being called ***"you..."***, always with a menacing voice and angry face.

She didn't like being 'you', and when she was, she often dreamt of disappearing.

There were many times she had been dangled over the ledge, so that a point could be made.

Even though she still wasn't quite sure what that point was.

One day, she heard her adults talking, and this time, they *both* left. Something

about ‘need to sign.’

All Ember knew was that the doorway was unguarded. Next to it, sat their ‘busted piece of shit emergency board’.

It was daylight.

So she left.

Her old shelter was high, very high, so high that it was always cold, even in the sun.

It took about twenty seconds of free-fall for Ember to learn how to hoverboard.

Then, when she slowed herself, she hid on the first level she could get to.

She piled up a big nest of vines and hid under them, not having any idea what to do next.

Ember remembered hiding inside a nest of vines for a very long time.

The sun came and went.

She got so thirsty.

She was used to always being hungry.

She had already learned that dew collected on things in the morning.

This was something she had to learn, since her adults didn’t like sharing the water that they had to buy.

She would wake up in the early morning and lick the dew from the vines before going back to sleep, hoping everything would be over soon.

She just wanted things to be over.

This was as good as life could get. Hiding in a wet stinky pile of vines.

No more ‘lessons’, no more yelling, no more hurting.

She didn’t even know what could be better than this.

Suddenly, there was fire, bright orange and red fire, lighting up the world around her in the middle of her sleep.

The nest she was staying in was ablaze, fire inches from

her face.

She screamed and crawled out of it before it had the chance to ignite her.

Crawling out of her cocoon, the first thing she saw was Silver, standing with her legs braced as she poured fire onto the cocoon of vines that Ember had been hiding in.

Silver's face was intense, angry.

Fearless.

As Ember emerged from her cocoon of vines, she saw Silver see her.

Then, her whole world changed.

"*Holy* shit! That's not void! NOT VOID! NOT VOID!!!" Sylvia screamed, pulling the chest strap for her flamethrower over her head and tossing her weapon to the side in panic.

She knelt in front of the small child, getting on eye level as her brain rushed to catch up with the sudden change in the situation.

The child watched Sylvia shift from intense and angry, to fearful and panicked.

Sylvia loudly complained, **"What the *Fuck*!"** as she noticed this small child was now covered in burning embers from her weapon.

And she was making no move to get the fire off.

Her eyes were instead locked on Sylvia, as she remained frozen in terror.

What the hell kind of pain tolerance did this *toddler* have???

She immediately began patting the kid down, using her bare hands to brush off the embers that hadn't settled into their clothing yet, and snuffing out the small flames that were threatening to grow on the child's clothing.

Once she was fire-free, Sylvia quickly gave her a once over to check and see if she was hurt.

"Holy shit, **kid**, *are you okay??* You were covered in embers!! Helloo?? Talk to me!!" Sylvia said, waving her hand in front of the kid's face, extremely concerned as she turned her around, examining her.

When she finished, she held her by the shoulders, gave her a final look over, then she let out a deep breath, hanging her head.

When she raised her head, she was smiling. She asked her, "What's your name, kid?"

The child didn't speak.

She knew that when people spoke, she was not allowed to speak; that was how things worked.

Slowly, with Sylvia crouched in front of her, her hands on her shoulders, Ember reached out and grabbed the edge of Sylvia's shirt, holding on for dear life.

The adult in front of her *cared* about her being '*safe'*.

She never wanted to let go of this feeling.

She didn't let go of Sylvia's shirt for so long that when Sylvia had to go to work the next morning, she had to take off her shirt without waking Ember, who was still holding the edge of her shirt.

Sylvia took that moment to be grateful Buddy had gotten her a backup shirt as a winter gift.

It took Ember almost a year with Sylvia to start speaking.

She didn't think she had a name anyway, even if she wanted to speak it.

As Sylvia began calling her 'Ember', she began to grow attached to the name.

She liked being 'Ember', 'Em', 'kiddo', and 'bugaboo'.

Before they had met, Silver was still called Sylvia, and her gear was different.

She used to carry a bag on her belt just for salt to use with her flamethrower.

She would throw the salt out in front of her in a cloud, point the flamethrower at it, and burn the cloud, turning it into a cloud of silver fire.

Ember had the idea to install the bag into the fuel line, so it slowly mixed salt into the fuel as it came out, creating salt/fire.

This resulted in a few things.

First, there was a day when Sylvia woke up to the child on the floor of her shelter with her flamethrower fully dismantled and spread across the whole floor.

When Sylvia was shocked,

the child fled the scene and hid for hours before Sylvia could coax her back into their main area again.

Ember also seemed to hit her ‘mute’ button again for a long while whenever Sylvia was loud or surprised.

When Sylvia got Ember out of her hiding spot and back in the main area, nearly half a day later, Sylvia began putting her flamethrower back together, but Ember kept getting in her way on purpose.

She may not have been talking, but she was beginning to make facial expressions, and she clearly thought Sylvia was a dummy for not getting what Em was trying to show her.

Finally, Em put the flamethrower together in a way it had never been before, and after that, Sylvia now had a flamethrower that spewed white flame that was a mix of salt and fire and was highly effective against the void.

Slowly beginning to talk, mostly by repeating what was said to show interest, Ember started calling Sylvia ‘Syl-va’ and people took that as ‘Silver’ because of her flamethrower.

Silver never corrected anyone.

Ember landed back at their shelter, thinking about the ratio of salt that was getting mixed in with Silver's fuel, and wondering how much salt she would need to mix with the boom powder to get it to be most effective while still being cheap.

Her mind played with ratios while she unpacked her hovercart and put the first of many plastic balls in the vice grip that was attached to the counter near the water station.

She secured the plastic ball and got out her hand crank drill, slowly eating into the plastic.

Once she got through, she blew off the dust, tapped it out, and put her fists on her hips, arms akimbo.

The 'flint' and steel.

She dropped her head to her right shoulder as she thought and made a face.

What about... a pull crank?

I guess... I could try it?

She had been given magnesium rods and jagged steel.

Unloading the rest of the contents of her mini-duffel onto the counter, she sat at her stool and got to work.

She cut a slit for the steel, then stabbed the jagged steel into the ball, which thankfully reached the middle of the ball where the rod was about to go.

Next, she used a different piece of the jagged steel to cut grooves into the magnesium rod where the steel would connect with it, to cause sparks inside the plastic ball.

As she struck the magnesium rod with the jagged steel, aiming to cause divets in the rod to give the steel something to strike against and create a spark; a shower of sparks flew off of the rod.

She jumped away in surprise, thoroughly focused on building the blueprint in her head.

She then looked at the materials in her hands and said, “Oh, duh.”

And continued doing the exact same thing.

Isaac stood back with his hair on end, mouth hanging open as his girl started summoning sparks of fire and ember.

Was that…

Was that where her name had come from?

He whimpered softly and retreated to their bed to watch, uncertain what would happen next.

Once she had some notches, she wound a string around a wheel and attached it to the top of the ball to hold the rod while allowing it to spin.

She attacked the magnesium rod to the wheel and soldered the top pieces together separate from the ball.

The rod would spin, the divets would strike randomly against the steel, and this would create the spark.

She attached the top on the rod and the rod in the ball using their precious small reserve of solar power that was specifically for Ember’s experiments.

Next, she mixed the first experimental ratio of salt to boom powder, a little heavy on the boom powder for good measure and funneled the contents into the ball.

Once she had the contents in the ball, she sealed it all together, checking it for leaks and making sure the only opening was the ripcord.

Confirming her first attempt was completely built, it was time to test it.

She hopped off her stool at the counter and headed outside to the ledge.

She pulled the ripcord and threw the thing as far as she could.

It worked!

It actually exploded!

What a relief, okay, she was

on the right track.

Now, get the ratio of salt to boom powder hammered out.

That explosion was a little bigger than necessary; she could probably cut the boom powder in half and switch it out for salt.

She might need even less boom powder than that.

Silver could use this to salt a room before she goes in with her flamethrower.

Pull the ripcord and toss it in. It could work like a large area of small effect, where her flamethrower was a small area of large effect.

As she was thinking this to herself, she walked back inside, back to the counter near the back of the shelter, when suddenly there was a loud **"VVVVVRRRRR"**ing followed by several loud crashes, a thud, and then suddenly there was an injured Silver rushing in through the doorway, gripping her ribs and scanning the room as she entered, looking for a fight.

Isaac rushes in front of Ember, barking wildly, his hair standing on end while baring his teeth, scared and confused.

Ember is frozen in place, her back pressed to her counter workbench, holding some tools in one hand and holding the counter with the other hand.

They make eye contact, and together they say, "What, the fuck."

Dez walks in on the tense situation and says, "Damn girl, you did all that to save 8 seconds? Hey, kid."

Ember peels herself from the counter and starts petting Isaac, who is still growling and not sure what to think of new people.

Gary enters the room shortly after Dez, and together they notice Isaac as Em reaches

down and starts to pet him.

Gary's voice rises in pitch to match what Tiny's had been when she met Isaac, while Dez's voice goes down a few octaves as she tucks her chin when she speaks.

"OH MY GOD ***A PUPPY***!!! DEZ LOOK!! DEZ DEZZIE LOOK IT'S A *BAAABBBYYYY*!!! OH MY *GOD*!!!" Gary exclaims as he crouches down at the knees as far as he can. He began to crouch walk towards Isaac, arms outstretched.

At the same time, Dez ducks her chin and says, **"WHAT?** How. A *BABY*? How. I mean, a *puppy*, yeah, but it's still- it's a BABY, how is it..." she gestures for the word with her hands, "HERE?"

Isaac, surprised by this turn of events, begins to wag his tail between his legs, his ears low and apologetic for growling.

Dez walks behind Gary, as he continues cooing and walking towards Isaac in his awkward crouch walk, she cocks her head to the side, and looks at Isaac. "Fluffy little shit. I'll give you that. What's up with his eyebrows?"

Ember shrugs, "I don't know, but they don't come off. I've tried."

Gary got within arm's reach of Isaac and gently reached out to him.

Isaac began tentatively licking his outstretched hand, then immediately, they were best friends.

Isaac and Gary began running around on the floor after each other, Gary on all fours and barking back at Isaac with equal enthusiasm.

Dez was leaning against the counter near Ember's workbench that held the buckets for washing, rubbing her forehead.

She couldn't stop imagining him as a father, but she needed to stop.

Having a baby in this world

was impractical, impossible, and unreasonable.

Probably other words that were bad that she wasn't immediately thinking of.

Silver shouted, "Dez, heads up!" as she motioned that she was going to toss her something. Dez looked up, and Silver tossed her a nutrition brick.

What?

These were hard to come by, and she was just... giving them to us?

Silver smiles at her and asks, "Peace offering?"

She looked at the brick in her hand.

They were going to need a lot more of these if she was going to grow another life.

Would there even be nutrition bricks wherever they ended up...?

If they left, that is.

There was so much uncertainty, so much unknown.

Dez snapped back to reality and shook her head quickly. "Uh – yeah. Not necessary, but thank you – I guess."

Dez looks back at Gary and Ember, where she sees Gary kneeling behind Isaac, while Isaac is sitting, Gary's hands are gently around Isaac's chest, holding him in place as Ember slowly backs away from them, repeating "*stay*" slowly, over-enunciating the word as much as possible.

They all stare at Isaac intently as he sits and wags his tail.

Slowly, Gary lets go of Isaac, as Ember continues to say "*stayyy*".

Isaac sits in place for a few seconds with nobody holding him there, and the room erupts with applause.

Isaac jumps and dances while being praised as a 'good boy' and a 'cute puppy'.

Desiree's heart is beating out of her chest.

He was *such* a natural father.

Maybe?

Maybe it wouldn't be selfish to start a family?

Buddy had come back into the room, carrying Silver's hoverboard from the room next doorway over, and was turning it over in his hands, inspecting the damage.

As he approaches Dez, he holds it up and asks, "Did you have Tiny modify yours to be able to take extra damage, by chance?"

Her diving board stunt, of course.

Not to mention anyone who looked at her board could see it was wider than normal boards, because of the shock absorber Gary had installed once she started diving into him like that.

"Uh... not exactly." She shifted uncomfortably. "Gary's modded it for me. He put a frame around it and attached some kind of bungee cords to absorb the shock... It isn't anything as sophisticated as Tiny would come up with, but it also costs a lot less." Dez nodded at the damaged board Buddy was inspecting, "How many times can her board stand up to being smashed like that?"

Buddy made a face, "Mmmm. 0? She'll need a ride to get it repaired." He says, laughing softly. "I get it, though. That's her kid. Might not be blood, but family is family. You know it when you see it."

Dez turned and looked back at Gary, who was playing with Em and Isaac. Their games had taken a turn for the silly, and Gary was flying Isaac around the room by holding him around his belly.

Isaac was allowing this but was clearly as uncomfortable as he was excited.

Ember was giggling while hovering around Gary, her hands nervously outstretched to catch Isaac if he fell, as though she were an

anxious parent.

“You know it when you see it, huh?” Dez mulled over Buddy’s words before clearing her throat. “Speaking of seeing things. I saw something disturbing on the recon today.” She raises her voice, “Hey guys, mind if we get back on track?”

Gary hands Isaac back to Em, and they gather on the floor in the middle of the living space where Silver had been clearing out a space for them as Gary and Em played.

Gary reaches into his bag and pulls out the two bottles he collected on his levels, wrapped in different colored tape. He hands one to Dez.

Seeing this, Em takes notice and asks, “Where did you get those!”

Gary stops with the bottle on the way to his mouth. “Level 87, it was weird up there. The walls were all blown out, there were tarps hung up at weird angles all over the place, the floor had buckets everywhere, and these weird taped-up bottles took up most of the floor.” He shrugs and takes a drink. “It’s clean, though. The kind of clean you only find at Tiny’s.” A look of realization strikes his face as he looks at Dez. “Shit, did we just steal from Tiny?”

“We? How was I involved?” She asks as she takes a drink and sighs happily.

Em giggles at the compliment. “Those are MY tarps, asshole. I rigged levels 87 and 89 to collect morning dew since most of the walls are blown out.

“Plus, some of the 100+ levels, but those are emergency backups *only*.

“87 and 89 get me more dew than the mesh wire levels up around 150 because it’s lower, even though those up higher have more air flow.”

Dez looks at her bottle thoughtfully. “You mean to tell me you guys have been living off *morning dew* while we’ve been living off polluted

rain that's been collected after flowing over concrete and mildew?" She takes another drink. "You guys suck."

Gary looks at Em, "How is Tiny involved?"

Em bounces, eager to talk about all of her different jobs. "She buys water from me! I collect water every morning and sell to her what we don't need!"

Dez waives her hand back and forth in the air, "Wait, wait, wait. You have *extra*. Don't tell me." Dez looks Ember up and down, musing, "You do look clean…"

"I take baths!" Ember interjects, pouting.

Dez narrows her eyes. "In *morning dew*. You *bathe* in *the dew. Of the morning*. Bitch. Fuck you. Most people here don't have enough water to survive, let alone bathe, yet here you are, living it up." She tips the bottle at Silver, "Ho-ly shit."

Ember is absolutely beaming. Silver tussles her dry and knotted hair, and Dez stares at it for a bit too long.

"I wouldn't be living this well if it weren't for her. She gets the water," Says Silver.

"Even if it hasn't rained!" Ember interrupts, then looks to Silver "And I hunt!"

"She hunts for us so we all have enough for 3 meals a day, including her puppy." Silver continues. "She tinkers." Silver gestures to Em's tools that are littering the counter. "She's brilliant. Irreplaceable."

She makes eye contact with Ember as she says the last part, and Em is overflowing with excitement.

She then looks like she has realized something, and quickly runs to her workbench, where she immediately sticks something in her vice and starts drilling into it.

Moving on, Silver clears her

throat while she pulls her report sheet out of her duffel, and the group follows suit.

Silver reports first, “I was able to clear most of level 75; there were some parts blocked off by debris, but I did confirm that there was no void.”

The group writes down varying versions of “75 fully clear, some debris.”

Ember then turns and loudly says “EYES”, waits for Silver and Buddy to shift so their backs are turned away from Ember.

They then gesture for the other two to face away as well before continuing.

From behind them, sparks begin to erupt, showering the floor of Em’s workspace, skittering a short distance before dying out.

Dez and Gary are noticeably unsettled by this as Buddy begins to give his report, unfazed. “Level 81 had a noticeable lack of void while I was there, so I cleared it quickly and decided to do level 82 as well.

“82 was mostly empty of void, but there will be some cocoons when we go back. In total there were cocoons in two rooms, one person turning into a cocoon, and one blossoming in a fourth room.

“I *also* came across a familiar face.” He grimaces. “I witnessed Skit collecting void. He sells void, apparently. Or distributes it, at least, somehow.

“Guess that explains the giggle. He would get exposed even if he didn’t consume it.”

This news sobered the group. There is a pause, and Gary is the first to speak. “That explains a few things. Okay, me next. On my level, 87, there was no void, only Em’s tarps. *But,* I’m thinking we should leave that out.”

The group murmurs in agreement.

“Thank you!” Em hollers as she has finished taking chunks out of the magnesium rods and begins mixing the salt and boom powder in a big bucket.

After the mix was ready, Em turned her attention back to the rods.

She needed to attach to the cap, but she had precious little solar power left.

An idea struck her!

She spot-soldered the rods to the wheel before apply small dots of hot glue around each bomb, spreading it out with other pieces of plastic.

This would have the added benefit of cooling even more quickly.

Em quickly funneled the powder mix into the remaining plastic balls and set to work sealing all 29 of them.

Des reports “93 was clear. 94, though? Was… disturbing. Frankly, it appeared to be filled, to the brim, with void.

“I didn’t go into the entrance, because I could see a void all around the entrance, and… well, frankly, it looked like a poorly laid trap.

“Waiting to eat anything that wandered in. Other than that, from what I could tell, the entire 90th level is filled with void.”

The room is silent for a moment, then Silver whistles, “I guess we know where they went, then. That’s good to know.”

Em suddenly yells “Ta-Da!” and turns around, holding a clear sphere containing grey powder and a rope twined around a rod at the top.

Everyone stares.

“What… the hell is that?” Dez asks.

Em pouts, “It’s why Silver almost destroyed her hoverboard and apparently needs a new one, thank-you-very-much.” She taunts.

Going around the room, she gives one to Gary first, then one to Dez, and two to Buddy.

Then she returns to her workbench, grabs five by carrying them in her shirt, and pours them into Silver's lap.

"They're salt bombs! Less explosive, more corrosive!" She says with a wink and a flare of her arm.

"Think of it like a *large area* of *small, continuous effect*, rather than a *small area* of *large, instant effect*, ya feel me?" She says with a smirk.

'This kid is so full of herself,' Silver thought, as she couldn't help but return Em's proud, accomplished, slightly overconfident smile, too entertained by her flair for presentation. "You did good kid! From what I saw, they look effective."

Em crumbled a little, anxious about being in trouble "The formula *did* change a little, from that, you see, that was a bigger explosion than I thought necessary, because, I, uh, I was looking for just enough of a BOOM to coat a room in salt dust, not **blow up the whole room,** *you know?"* She explains with a quick giggle "but *these*, however, are ***perfectly safe*** to use these before you go into a room. Which is... you know... what I made them for, but, uh... yeah... you know."

Silver hugs her to stop her from panicking, "I mean it kid, you did good. Thank you"

Em smiles, loving Silver's warmth, and hugs her back quickly before pushing her away. "Alright, alright, enough already, leave me alone. I have to make twenty more!" She returns to her workbench, loading another plastic ball into the vice grip.

The newly formed team of four settles in to wait for her to finish before having dinner.

Buddy retreats to his corner near the vines in the back to meditate before dinner, while

Silver, Dez, and Gary head back into the main living space of the shelter.

Silver sat back down on the floor in the cleared space and struck up a conversation with Dez, hoping for an adult to talk to about how stressful it was when you were responsible for another life that kept endangering itself with possibilities to be removed from, well, life.

Dez was scanning the shelter, trying to see what else they had hidden, occasionally being as nosy as seemed permissible by getting up and poking into bins to help Silver or Em 'find things' all the while feigning interest in a conversation with Silver regarding Silver's woes related to youthful motherhood.

Silver was occasionally overly dramatic and silly, and Dez wondered if Silver was intentionally trying to get under her skin by bragging about having a kid.

Dez looked to Gary for emotional support in the conversation, but Gary was preoccupied playing with Isaac and his tug-of-war toy.

The toy consisted of a used, but clean, cloth that Ember had tied knots into so they each had a fair shot at holding on.

Returning her attention to the conversation, she heard Silver wondering, rather quietly, about her board, how much to fix it, and whether she would be able to get the same mods again.

Silver was staring at the floor as she talked.

When she finished talking, she sighed, peeked over her shoulder at Ember, looked back at the floor, and started playing with something at her feet.

She then grabbed what she was playing with, flopped back, and used the momentum of flopping back to toss the thing, a plastic bottle? In the air behind her.

It sailed above Ember, missing her by about a foot high and half a foot to the left, gently knocked into the wall, and fell to the floor again.

“Missed,” said Ember, in a monotone voice, not looking up or turning from her workbench.

“Not my fault you’re a short ass.” Silver grumbled.

“Left,” said Ember, in the same monotone voice, not breaking her rhythm or turning her attention from her project.

Silver took a deep breath and let it all out at once before sitting up to find that Dez was, in fact, paying attention. “Oh, sorry, I thought I lost you ages ago.”

Another bottle flies in and bounces off Silver’s head, coming from the back of the room.

Buddy is sitting still, pretending to meditate, trying very hard not to smile.

When Ember finished with 10 of the 20 bombs, which takes about fifteen more minutes, she turned from her workbench and rejoined the group, and announced, “Bro, I’m *hungry*.”

Silver and Ember began to dig through their rations, debating first on dehydrated or cured meat.

Then, after settling on dehydrated meat because of having company, they began to bicker about which type of meat was most appropriate for said company.

They finally settled on alligator meat, assuming it would be taken as the least risky to consume when offered by someone else, and there was no way to officially prove Tiny was the one who butchered all their meat.

Ember insisted on being the one to pass out dinner that night, since she was the one who hunted it, and she was excited to show off her hosting skills to new people.

When everyone had their

portion of meat and a bottle of water, it finally felt like the day was over.

Everyone began to visibly relax, leaning back on their elbows and stretching out their legs while indulging in small talk.

“Hey, kid, wanna come sit by me? I’ll show you how to read a little. We won’t be able to get through much since we don’t have much time, but we can cover some of the basics of reading and writing. Get you ready to write reports when you’re older.” Dez asks Ember with a friendly smile.

Ember throws her head back, slaps her palms to her cheeks, hooks her fingertips into the bags under her lower eyelids, and pulls down her lower eyelids as she tosses her head forward at Dez and exclaims in a hushed whisper, “NOT SO **LOUD**! You’re ***going*** to ***remind her***!”

Dez’s face freezes in an awkward smile. “I… uh, what?”

Ember shuffle crawls over to Dez while Silver pretends to be too thoroughly engaged in conversation with Buddy and Gary to notice Em’s dramatic display three feet from her.

When Em reaches Dez, she has them both turn their backs to the other 3, and Em begins whispering to Dez in a hushed voice, “Every *single* night she has me read at least two chapters. Two whole chapters! I’ve *never* met another *human* who had to read assignments. It’s **evil**.” Silver laughs abruptly, and Em shoots a glance over her shoulder to see if Silver was watching them.

Silver was still facing Gary and Buddy, so Em continued, interested in showing off, “Wanna know what I’m reading right now? It’s by a guy called pabalob, it’s kinda about brainwashing? But I’m, like, *super* into it, but *don’t* tell Silver or she’ll probably find a million more books like this and have me reading a *hundred* chapters a night!”

Em collapses to the floor in a show of drama with the appropriate 'ugh' sound effect.

Dez pats Em's head, chuckling, and says, "There, there, at least you are secretly learning how to brainwash people, like a super cool spy girl. Maybe one day you can brainwash Silver into not having you read every night."

Em launches up off the floor and exclaims, "You think?"

"Heard that." Says Silver.

Ember visibly deflates and says "...poo..." Dez and Em turn back to the circle and rejoin the conversation.

Gary remarks, "Man, I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around the whole 90th level being void. That's just so much. Not even all in one space, but in total. I didn't expect there to be that much at all, let alone on one level with more in other places."

Ember looks confused. "What do you mean? It's literally everywhere. I thought the whole Tower was made of it?"

The group turns to look at her, Silver eyes her cautiously and asks, "What... do you mean by that?"

Em began to answer, "The upper levels you guys destroyed the other day? I was going by there to collect water, and I saw the damage."

Gary and Dez look at Buddy and Silver; they had all yet to see any damage they were sent out to find on this recon.

"84 was crumbled at the exit, all the walls were falling off and leaning away from the rest of the Tower, but it looked like it was being glued back together by the black ooze, with thick black ropes wrapped around the outside of the Tower, like they were pulling it back together." She continued, shrugging, "I just assumed that it was void.

Definitely wasn't about to go check or nothin…"

Hearing this, collectively their hearts lurch up into their throats, then fall out of their asses.

"It… lives in the walls?" Gary asks, turning to look at Dez.

All color has drained from Dez's face. She speaks quickly and quietly, "Fuck if I know. Kid, you're not *fucking with us*, are you? It would be *really* **uncool** if you were fucking with us right now."

Em tilts her head to the side while nibbling on a piece of meat, her face blank, confused, "Why… would I do that?" She pulls her eyebrows together, "No, I am not 'fucking with you', Dez. I am not 'fucking with' any of you. I do not like 'fucking with' people." Em's face looks mildly angry and slightly insulted.

Dez sighs, "Dammit, kid. I really wish you were."

Chapter 8

Shortly after dinner, Dez and Gary leave for the night.

Ember waves them off and watches them leave, and once she's sure they're out of earshot, she immediately goes inside to talk to her about the Demigod biz they had gone over with Tiny.

Re-entering the shelter, Ember calls out cautiously, still looking back to the doorway, "Hey *Siiillverrr*? I think I can summon a Demigod."

Buddy's eyes pop open, then his face scrunches into a confused expression.

He was meditating near the back again, trying to be successful this time.

Silver was washing bottles in the dish bucket when Ember made her announcement.

She froze before responding, "Fukkn wut?"

"Yeah! So- like- I was gathering vines the other day, and I heard some teens nearby. I'm pretty sure they were doing void; but they were like- *talking about* how to summon a Demigod!" Ember pipes excitedly.

Silver shakes both her head and her hands back and forth, processing the information. "*What?* How close? Where? Were you sure they were taking void? Where were they? How far gone were they?"

Ember frowns, upset that Silver isn't listening to the fact that she can summon a Demigod.

Her thoughts were so much more local, so much more boring.

She sighs and thinks, "Uhmm, level 55, southeast corner."

Silver's stomach drops.

That wasn't on their doorstep, but it was close.

Too close for comfort.

Void was known to wander at night between blooming

sessions if it didn't catch any prey.

It could easily reach them in their sleep.

Shit shit *shit* ***shit***, Silver thinks to herself, beginning to panic. "When was this?"

Ember shifts uncomfortably. "I don't know… a couple of days?"

If they were on the verge of turning when she came across them, they could be wandering cocoons by now.

She needed to take precautions.

Silver dropped the bottle she had been in the middle of washing, briskly walked to the back, grabbed a double armload of dry vines, shoved them in her pack, grabbed her flamethrower and headed out the door, calling behind her, "Be right back!"

She lit a vine as a torch as she left.

Ember is rubbing her forehead, trying not to stress herself out about how Silver just took the majority of their dry vine supply, and she was already behind on restocking their wet vine supply.

If they ran out, they were fish in a barrel.

Fuck.

Ember took a big breath and let it out.

She was frustrated.

Frustrated that she was dismissed when she was trying to talk about something cool, and instead, there was an unexpected consequence.

She turned to Buddy, who was pretending to meditate.

She didn't know how she knew he was pretending, but she knew.

"Why is she always so panicked, and you're so, chill?" She asked, her tone accusatory.

Buddy didn't try to fake focusing on something else; he shrugged, his eyes still closed. "Probably

Buddhism."

He opens his eyes, looks at Em, and makes a small mouth shrug and head tilt.

"What made you want to be a Buddhist, anyway? Nobody else around here cares. Talk Shit Get Hit. The unwritten rule of the Tower.

"Yet, here you are, going against the rules and trying to be all… Peaceful. What gives?" Ember asks, eyeing him as she speaks.

He chuckles. He knew they would have this conversation one day, and he respected her for asking instead of accusing or assuming she already knew.

Even if she was in a mood, she was approaching to understand, not approaching to fight.

"Well… If you think about it. Buddhism, or religion in general, is a natural progression for someone recovering from a life of violence.

"A good Buddhist takes a vow of non-violence, a good Christian learns to turn the other cheek." He shrugs, "Wiccans also take vows of non-violence." He shrugs again, raising his hands this time with the shrug.

"When you are recovering from a life of violence, you need to learn how to choose peace. You need to learn how to be gentle, and how to let other people be gentle with you without being suspicious of them.

"You need to learn to approach with curiosity, to approach seeking to understand, instead of approaching to be right, to fight, or to criticize.

"A lot like you are doing right now, kiddo. Good job. I'm proud of you." He whispers, and smiles at her before continuing.

"Doing this, choosing peace, choosing curiosity… It forces you to take the time to reprogram your brain away from everything you had been beaten into you growing up,

and gives you the space to ***choose*** the kind of person *you* want to be going forward.

“Instead of hating yourself for being nothing more than a shitty product of a shitty environment that was never your fault, never your choice, and shouldn’t have been your problem to begin with.

“It gives you a way to break the cycle, to be the change,” Buddy says, closing his eyes as he speaks.

He felt awkward talking about his beliefs like this, and he fully expected to be judged; it was easier to close his eyes instead of avoiding eye contact.

Ember is quiet for a moment before speaking. “You and Tiny seem to think Buddhism are very different things. She explains it as Buddhas, Demons, Goddesses, and Gods that are there for you to save you from a darkness that can consume you.

“But you seem to think it’s a lot of sitting around with your eyes closed. What about that?” She asks, considering.

“You *do* do a whole lot of nothing.” Ember asks, sounding suspicious and hesitant.

Buddy barks out a sudden laugh. “Well, both are right, in a way. Meditating *is* a lot of sitting around with your eyes closed, when you look at it from the outside.

“But if someone were to look at you when you’re crafting, it would look like unorganized chaos. But to you, you know exactly what you’re doing, don’t you?”

Ember frowned and nodded, not knowing where this was going.

Buddy continues, “When someone meditates, they won’t always know what they’re doing, like you do, but they can see inside their head the same way you can when you’re working.

“When you’re meditating, you explore the world through

your senses, and try to be present in that moment as much as you can.

“You appreciate that moment, you don’t worry about the past, or the future, you don’t think about what is bothering you.

“You let your thoughts go, not by trying to suppress them but by accepting them. By letting them flow through your mind without you attending to them or trying to hold onto them the way people normally do.

“They become part of the environment, rather than being things you possess.

“Think of your mind like your workbench, and the objects on it are the things that are going on in your life right now. Taking the time to meditate gives you time to clean up your work bench, giving you the mental space to take on bigger and bigger projects.

“The reason some Buddhists meditate all the time is they are trying to take on life’s biggest questions, which require a lot of space on their workbench.”

Ember considers this, then sits next to Buddy. She calls for Isaac, “Isaac, Come Here.” Isaac trots over to her and sits in front of her. “Good boy, stay with me.”

Isaac lies down and puts his head in Em’s lap.

With her hand on his head, Em closes her eyes and begins to try to clear her mind.

That night, Buddy continued to sleep sitting against the wall, keeping watch over his girls during the night.

Buddy woke as the sun rose. He had this natural ability that Silver found endlessly annoying, where he couldn't sleep past sunrise.

She found this annoying because at the beginning of their friendship, this often led to him coming around far before she was ready to be awake.

Before waking the snoring Silver, he swapped the chargeable things in Silver and Ember's duffels.

Next he removed the batteries from all 3 of their boards, plus Em's hovercart.

He unfolded the solar panels from yesterday's batteries and placed them on the ledge by Ember's workbench.

This was the only window in their shelter that was covered by see-through plastic.

It was thick enough to protect them, and translucent enough to let light in throughout the day to charge their batteries.

As he placed each battery there to charge, he grabbed its counterpart that had been charging the day before, folded the solar panels, and inserted it into its respective hovery thing.

He stored Silver's board in her massive duffel.

Not only was it busted and needed to be replaced, if it wasn't in her duffel first thing in the morning, she never remembered to grab it.

He then clipped Em's board to his, and left a note for Em so she knew where they went and that they would be back with her board soon.

He then shook Silver's shoulder lightly, with progressive intensity, until she flopped over and swung her arm at his face, still half asleep.

He dodged easily. "Come on, time to go, we need to go to Tiny to get a loaner board and ask her to fix yours. *Get up,"* He says gently as he keeps

nudging her.

"*Mmmmmmmmm* I'm *uuppp"* she mumbles, sitting up and stretching before wiping her mouth.

Sitting up, her eyes remain unfixed, staring into nothingness.

She takes a few seconds to sit up and gather herself mentally, and then she's up and moving faster than most humans would if they snorted a caffeine pill from the enforcers.

Buddy jokingly referred to this as her 'boot up sequence'.

Within minutes, they were on their way to Tiny's.

Swinging into Tiny's entryway, Buddy knocks on her door while Silver begins fidgeting with her duffel.

Standing in the entryway carrying a dead hoverboard, which was barely concealed in her duffel, made her feel like turning herself in after making a semi-serious mistake.

Tiny came to the door relatively quickly, wearing a waist apron and wiping her hands on a rag.

They looked at each other as she tucked the rag into her apron, and asked, "Pretty early for you two, what can I do for you?"

Silver sheepishly pulls her board out of her bag. As the board begins to emerge, Tiny covers her face with one hand, the other supporting her elbow.

She shakes her head and holds out the hand that was covering her face, sighing, "What did you do? Hand it over, let me see the damage."

Silver sheepishly hands over the board while Tiny asks, "What happened? Does this have to do with that explosion yesterday?" Tiny smirks as she asks this.

"*That* was Em, actually." Silver answers, looking to the

side, frustrated.

Tiny chuckles, “Oh, was it? That’s interesting. I wonder how that happened.” Tiny is trying not to smile.

Silver stared at Tiny, face and voice thick with sarcasm, “Yeah, me too. Pretty big surprise to come back and see a *bomb* go off outside our doorway.”

Tiny snorts, coughs, and clears her throat. “Sorry, I must be coming down with something. I’ll see what I can do to get this fixed by the end of the day. Free of charge. Kids can be, uh, quite inventive, can’t they? Hang tight, I’ll grab you a loaner,” She says with a chuckle.

Tiny takes the board inside her level and returns with a standard board for a loaner.

Silver’s mouth, eyebrows, and eyelids were flat lines. “Uh-huh. Thanks, I guess.”

Buddy clears his throat, suppressing a smile, and says, “Thank you for taking care of it, Tiny. We appreciate it very much.” As Tiny hands Silver the loaner.

Silver shoots him a look that could kill, and he clears his throat again, still trying not to smile.

Tiny taps two fingers to her forehead in a mock salute. “You got it. Any idea if the kid will be by sometime today, or are we looking at another dry day?”

“We’re working a job where we have to clear levels seventy-five through one hundred in three days. We came across some of her water traps during this clearing, and she’s been our shadow ever since.” Buddy explained.

Tiny took notice of the levels, “Seventy-five through one hundred?” she whistles, “Jeez, who did you piss off?”

Buddy looks at Silver to answer the question, but instead of saying anything, Silver crosses her arms and pouts.

This makes Tiny laugh, “Alright, get out of here, I have things to do.” Tiny goes back to her level, waving behind her as she closes the door.

She heads to her storage room and pulls out two storage bins filled with backup water bottles to stock her inventory for the day.

Arriving back at their shelter, they find Gary and Dez waiting for them, eating breakfast with Em.

As soon as they enter the shelter, Dez stands up, points at Em, and loudly announces, “Em was gonna skip breakfast!” She turns to face Em, “And she was gonna *lie* about it.”

Em’s mouth falls open, her eyes wide. She looked up at Dez, “You bitch.”

Dez put her hands on her hips, looking smug as hell. “I *told* you I was gonna tell. You shoulda listened to me when I was looking to make a deal, kiddo.” Dez looks at Silver and holds up a nutrition brick; this one was brown instead of standard green.

The brown nutrition bricks were supposed to be chocolate.

They did not taste like chocolate.

The green was supposed to taste like green tea.

They tasted like algae.

The ‘chocolate’ tasted slightly better than the algae.

“I brought this for the kiddo, but she refused. I tried to make a deal, but she wouldn’t deal. So I resorted to issuing a threat, and she made the mistake of” Dez pointedly looked at Em, “Not believing the crazy bitch when she says she’s gonna do something crazy.”

Em was sitting on the floor, looking miserable. “Won’t do *that* again.”

Silver then noticed that not only did Ember look excessively miserable, but her hair was standing on end, poking out in all directions. “Uh… What?” Silver asks, gesturing to her own head.

Dez looks confused, looks at Em, then says, “Oh!” She makes a click noise by sucking her tongue behind her teeth, “Girl. Her hair’s a damn mess, and she’s tender-headed as hell. When’s the last time you

combed her hair?" She points at Silver with the comb, glaring.

Silver's heart sped up, and her voice grew soft. "What? You can, you have, where do you get?" Silver clasps Dez's hand in hers and leans in close before whispering, *"Lady, please help me. She has so many knots, and my fingers only do so much.* Tiny helps with some oils, but my brushes don't work, her hairs too thick, and I never thought, oh my god, would Tiny maybe have another comb? *OMG, Dez, **HELP** US, please, what do we need? Help, please, this is such a problem, please help I'll do* **anything**.*"*

Dez smiles widely and holds open her arms in a 'hug me' gesture. Silver immediately hugs her, Dez whispers in Silver's ear "I woulda done this anyway, just for Em, but, if you're offering... maybe a bath now and then?" She pulls away, winking.

They immediately became mom friends.

Dez steps back, and they sit where they were standing, and in front of them is now Em, sitting, looking angry and miserable.

"Buddy, would you please grab some meat for Em? She needs breakfast." Silver calls over her shoulder, while Dez bounces the chocolate nutrition brick in front of Ember's face, taunting her while giggling.

Ember angrily snatches it out of the air and grumbles, "I Hate You."

"Already on it!" Buddy answers, digging through some bins. He finally found some dehydrated duck and brought it over to the hair party.

Duck was a party favorite of the trio; both Em and Silver particularly loved it, and while Buddy loved it too, he often offered up some of his portion to the girls, claiming it was too fatty for his liking.

While dehydrated duck was less fatty than fresh roasted duck, hopefully, having some of this and a chocolate nutrition brick for breakfast would make enduring this temporary torture a little easier.

Plus, in the long run, she'll sleep better without all those knots in her head.

They spent almost two hours gently working through the knots in Ember's hair, applying oils, and massaging the scalp. In the end, they did not stop because they were finished, but rather because Em was on the verge of real, pain-filled tears.

This was when Dez performed another miracle.

From her pocket, she produced two small pills.

Silver eyed them cautiously, which made Dez laugh.

"Relax. They're from Tiny. We went there last night, and I told her I was going to try to tackle Em's hair today. "She gave me these to give to Em at no charge. I was going to buy them, but she insisted." She shrugs, "She was about as happy as you were to hear somebody was finally going to do something about this kid's hair," she said, laughing.

She bends down and kisses the top of Em's head, which causes Em to wail.

"We're not done, though," Dez continues, which causes Em to wail louder. "Don't worry, Goldy, we're done for *today*, but we should finish it out soon. Probably going to take two, maybe three more days at this pace." Dez makes a face, not happy with the timeframe.

Em is in the fetal position on the floor, knees tucked under her, hands covering her head. She begins to reach back and pull the collar of her shirt up to cover the back of her head.

"Ooh! Good idea!" Dez exclaims. "Be right back." Dez runs out of the shelter,

grabs her board, and zips off.

Silver and Buddy look at Gary. Gary whistles, “I know, but I’m not telling. She’ll hate me for ruining the surprise.” He sits down by Em and starts stroking her back. “She really loves you, kiddo. We all do.”

“Fuck. You. All.” Em grumbles back, biting back tears.

Shortly after, Dez was back, waving a shiny purple and gold piece of bunched-up cloth above her head, and she had another wide-tooth comb in her other hand.

Gary’s mouth dropped open. “*The **purple** one?* Dez, are you sure?” He whispers.

Dez giggles, “Of course I’m sure, silly. She’s just a kid; her first bonnet should be special. Especially after today. Anything that will help, right hon?” She asks as she kneels, lies down, and gets on eye level with Em, who is still curled up and angry.

Lying on the floor next to Em, Dez is careful to leave the new comb on the floor and only bring the new royal purple bonnet with gold-patterned sparkles into sight for Em to inspect.

Silver stealthily grabs the comb to move it out of their way and tries to hand it to Gary, who holds his hand up in refusal, whispering, “Oh, no, I’m certain that is for you.”

Seeing the bonnet, Em’s eyes go wide, she rolls over to face towards Dez, as her hands leave her hair for the first time since the brushing stopped, cautiously reaching towards the offering.

Dez’s smile is wide and warm. “It matches you, see, Goldy?” She bridges the gap between Em and the bonnet, placing it in her hands, laying the purple and gold fabric of the tie against the gold tattoos on her arm. “Here, let me show you how to put it on.”

It was soft and smooth,

almost slick.

Em had never felt a material like this before. Dez said it was ‘silk’?

It felt amazing on her skin, and Em wondered where she could get a million more like these.

She would need to see Tiny about this immediately.

After the job, of course.

Dez quickly showed the room how to bundle up Em’s hair, while Gary handed Em a bottle of water to take the pills Tiny had sent.

“*Normally,* you would *never* wear your bonnet **outside.** But, since it’s new, and we’re using it to cover up a *work in progress*... today, and **today only,** you can wear it outside.” Dez bends down to Em’s eye level, making steady eye contact as she says, “But, *lady.* Don’t **ever.** Let me catch you outside, wearing this beautiful bonnet. **You hear me?”**

Em nods, trying to match Dez’s intensity.

The pills worked surprisingly fast, and after just ten minutes, Em was back to bouncing around the shelter.

Once Em was feeling better, they prepared to leave. Everyone agreed it was fine if they finished fewer levels than they had planned to today.

Buddy unclipped Em’s board and handed it back to her.

She quickly snatched her board and slapped a note of her own onto his face before walking away, pouting.

The note read, “Fuck You.”

Buddy chuckled as he read it, folding it up and putting it in his pocket.

When Em announced she was going with Gary to collect water and ‘probably follow him around for the rest of the day,’ this was only met with mild resistance from Silver to Ember, as well as multiple threatening looks to Gary from Silver.

As Gary and Em left the

shelter, Silver touched Dez's arm to have her hang back for a moment. "First of all, thank you. Thank you for absolutely everything." Dez puts a hand to her chest and smiles.

"I'm not done! Second, I will repay you whatever the comb costs, and the bonnet. I can't believe I haven't looked for one yet. Thank you again. Seriously. Third, do you think…" Silver looks to the side, "It's sad that I don't know this. I should know this. But, do you think we can get more of her hair done tonight? She seemed pretty recovered after those pills from Tiny. Maybe? I'm just so excited to have it be taken care of."

Silvers hand was still on Dez's arm, and Dez places one hand over Silver's while holding the other hand up, one finger at a time as she goes through the list "You're welcome, you're welcome, there's nothing to pay back, Tiny magically had another that was exactly like what I was describing and gave it to me for free, and I mean it when I say the bonnet should be special, you're welcome, and honestly? Yeah, probably!" She says the last part with a thoughtful look on her face. "I'm going to swing by Tiny's sometime today before the end of the day and grab some more of those magic pills, if we can get those in the child before we begin, we might even be able to finish brushing it out today, then I can teach you some simple styles she can wear instead of being au natural all the time."

Silver drops her head forward, on the verge of tears, feeling a heavy weight she didn't know she had been carrying suddenly lift from her heart.

She hugs Dez tightly around the shoulders, *"I Love You So Fucking Much, Dez!!!"* Silver cries as she begins to cry openly into Dez's shoulder.

By now, Gary has run out of excuses to give Em to keep her distracted, and the two re-enter the shelter to find Silver awkwardly weeping into Dez's shoulder.

Em rolled her eyes, stomps one foot, and loudly sings "**LET'S GO** *Already!!"*

Dez awkwardly lifted Silver's head off of her shoulder, still patting her back. "Alright, everybody, remember the plan? We finished our first levels, so today is Silver, 76 through 80, Buddy, 83 through 86, Gary, 88 through 92, and me, 95 through 98. We have just over half of today and all of tomorrow to get this done."

They agree, split off, and head in their separate directions.

Silver arrives at level 76 and finds the entrance.

Entering the level, she finds it darker than she expected, which makes her nervous.

She turns around as she enters, only to find a massive pile of void bunched up around the inside of the entrance to the level.

The void is old void, piled up in balls with tendrils connecting them, pulsing as though they were a network of yuck.

The hairs across Silver's body stand on alert.

The old void laid a trap.

A decent one, this time.

Was it learning?

She immediately sped back out of the level as some of it dropped off the wall above the doorway above the entrance, missing her by a hair.

What the *fuck*.

She immediately went up to level 77, needing to rush.

Torn between needing to speed off and tell her teammates and between trusting them to take care of themselves, she sped to and through the next level in a frenzy, eager to meet with her teammates.

77 was another empty level.

She quickly flies around the level to be thorough, finishes her lap, and begins to wonder if she would also find a garden on this level if she were to dig a little deeper.

Deciding she can afford a few seconds to investigate, she flies to the outside, heads to the diagonal opposite side of the entrance to the level, and there it was. Walls knocked down on the outside of a room, dirt filling buckets with green things sprouting out of them. Re-entering the level, she found the room to be walled off from the inside, with no doors and rubble piled around the walls.

"Interesting…" Silver muses,

“Another *entirely* empty level. What do you know?”

Feeling like she has wasted entirely too much time on this now, she rushes out to the next level and on her way, she almost flies directly into Buddy, who immediately pulls her into a hug, wrapping one arm around her waist and the other into her hair, pulling her close while they both are standing in midair on their hoverboards.

Buddy hadn't been as thorough with his levels as Silver.

If an area seems inaccessible, he left it alone.

He was nervous about today, though.

He knew full well today was the day he would be investigating the damage from the initial event, all alone.

He wished Silver were here.

He needed her; she was his rock.

He arrived at the level where they found Isaac, level 83, the level where the void suspiciously wouldn't go.

Yet, he found nothing.

There was no evidence they had been there at all.

No cracks in the ceiling. The wall the void had broken through was back in place.

Was he going crazy?

What was going on?

Did he make it all up?

No, that couldn't be.

Silver was there when it happened, and where would Isaac have come from?

He flew around level 83 in a daze, hardly noticing that more than half of the level was now walled off in an inaccessible room with rubble piled high around it, or that unfamiliar birds were chirping loudly around him.

The ceiling showed no cracks.

How could this be?

He quickly flew to level 84 and immediately stopped just closer than 10 meters to the entrance.

That wasn't a shadow inside the level. The level *was* a shadow.

As he hovered there, looking at it, tendrils slowly uncurled from the entrance, stretching out towards him.

His blood ran cold.

He needed Silver.

Dez braces herself as she gets to her first level, 95, not knowing what to expect.

As she enters the level, she finds it surprisingly empty.

Unlike the other levels, this level is mostly walled off, appearing to have suffered massive structural damage.

The interior of the Tower was much smaller here than in other places, and she cleared it quickly.

Moving up to level 96, she finds cocoons in two older rooms; they have sunken into circular blobs rather than oval human-shaped cocoons.

In the next room, she finds two very fresh, still speaking, cocoons.

She moves on, trying to ignore them as they beg for help in two very different ways.

One was begging for her to help her, please save her.

"Stop!!! You have to stop it!!! Stop it from eating me!!! You can't just ***leave*** *me, god damn it!!! You have to* ***help me!!!****"*

The other was begging for more void to numb the pain as he died.

She covers her ears as she moves to the next room, where she finds that the couple hadn't moved very far. The room next to them being a blossoming void that had been recently picked.

Still able to hear the cries from the couple as they became more painful and distorted, Dez kept moving.

Moving further into the level, she finds a network of large balls of void connected by tubes of void that seem to be pulsing, and decides 'that's enough for today.'

As she turns to leave, she sees the girl from before using her elbows to drag herself out of the room she had been in, trailing most of her body behind her. One of her legs had stopped

following a while back, as her torso spilled open behind her as she dragged, her organs slowly dissolving into void.

"*Please! Please,* ***help me****, please,* ***do something****, you* *BITCH,* ***please****, you have to help me!"* she cried out to Dez, reaching out to her as she fell onto one shoulder, void actively dissolving up her sternum into her the hollow of her throat and out to her collar bones.

*"****IT BURNS!!*** *OH GOD, IT* ***BURNS****. Make it* ***STOP****, please,* ***god damn it****, DO SOMETHING!!!* ***Make it STOP!!"*** The cocoon woman cried.

As the woman cried, a tendril of void curled out of the room she had crawled out from, hesitated, then shot out, engulfed her, and dragging her bits and pieces back into the room as she continued to scream for help.

As the woman was dragged back into the room, one of her arms detached from her chest, getting left behind momentarily before being picked up by more tendrils.

The screaming abruptly stopped with a wet squishing sound.

Think of something else.

Think of *anything* else.

A thought surges into Dez's mind.

Gary.

Family.

Her family.

Her family with Gary.

Being with Gary and his family, living on the Tower in the 150+ levels where they were safe outside the enforcers reach.

Gary and his nieces and nephews.

Having a kid with Gary.

Raising her kid with Gary.

And knowing, deep in her

core.

That if their kid *ever* refused to take care of their hair, *or do their chores* ***or do their DAMN homework!***

She could **at least** take solace that Gary wouldn't let her bring out the damn slipper.

Dez hovered, frozen in place, then she immediately broke for the exit, whispering a quiet "Bye, Lady, better luck next time" as she tore off out of the level, passing the severed arm still in the process of being dragged into the room.

She needed a break.

Dear *god* she needed a break.

She decided she would peek at level 97, *at the first hint of void*, she would break and go see Tiny.

She needed a breather.

She flew up to level 97, extremely tense, and found it slightly larger than level 95. However, other than that, it was identical to level 95.

Thank god.

She exited the level, made her notes, and flew to Tiny's.

Landing at the entryway in the middle of the day, Dez waited in line for her turn. When she got to the front of the line, Tiny was standing behind her half door with the counter built into the top of the door, and she greeted Dez the way she greeted everyone, well, most everyone, with a genuine smile and a friendly "Welcome! What can I do for you?"

Des responded by forcing an overly pleasant smile and said, "Hi! So, last night, we gave Em that gift *after* we had already did... um... *some* of her hair."

Tiny's face immediately falls into a flat 'are you kidding me' face. "You really do need instructions for everything, don't you. Okay, be right back."

Tiny quickly returns with a bottle of water, as she hands the bottle of water to Dez, she tilts it so Dez sees a tiny bag with two pills taped to the bottom of the bottle "Give Em this bottle of water, have her consume it and everything attached to it fifteen minutes BEFORE you comb her hair, use the comb I gave you yesterday. And all will be well. Kapeesh?" Tiny looks at Dez with her mouth, eyebrows, and eyes flat.

"Kapeesh. Thank you, Tiny," Dez looks at the ground as she speaks.

Tiny reaches out and tussles Dez's perfectly sculpted hair, knowing it will annoy her. "You got it, kid. Let me know if you need anything else."

"I, uh, do. Or- well- um... *we*... do... But I need Gary here with me. We're... uh... we're probably going to ask you for something... together... in a few days..." Dez won't make eye contact with Tiny.

Tiny raises her eyebrows, then looks Dez up and down, gauging if she's serious or not. "Oh, really? Okay. Thanks for the heads up, it

usually takes a few days to get things ready anyway. I appreciate it. Now get outta here now, you're holding up the line."

Dez is tearing up. "Thank you, Tiny." She starts to cry as she leaves.

After leaving, Dez quickly swings by Silver's shelter and drops off the bottle, then heads up to Gary's levels to see how he's doing.

Chapter 9

Gary and Em took off together that morning, with Em splitting off at level 87 to collect water.

Gary started on level 88 but didn't even make it into the level, as the entrance was a trap.

The first few feet of the entrance were a normal shadow, but beyond that was pure void, waiting for an unassuming victim to wander in.

He headed down to check on the kid, and after finding her thoroughly occupied, he told her, "Hey, kid, if you stay put for 5 full minutes, I'll tell you a secret."

Em's voice had that same monotone quality it took on when she was at her workbench, that 'fuck off, I'm focused' voice. "Bro, I'll be here at least 10. I have to do the whole level, fuck off."

Gary nodded, satisfied.

He then headed up to level 89, finding it fully open and empty, with barely any walls, just tarps everywhere. This would likely be where Em was headed next.

Not more than two minutes had passed.

He jumped up to the next level, 90.

The outer walls were intact again, and the entrance to the level was almost difficult to find, being a smaller-than-normal doorway.

This was not the usual structure of the levels.

Normally, the entrance to every level was marked by the statue with the lantern out on the ledge.

The entrances were concrete openings, slightly larger than two of the doors to the one to the enforcer's office, put next to each other, with a concrete trim surrounding the entrance.

But here, where it should be, there was just a wall. However, in the middle of the air down the way, there was a

small opening, roughly shaped like a doorway, but it was crooked, and had no trim.

Was the Tower changing shape?

Was that even possible?

Arriving at the new entrance, the wind seemed to be pushing him in, and there was a slight groaning from inside the level.

Whatever was in that level was not about to include a Gary or an Em.

He promptly fucked off, flying directly back to the child.

He arrived back at level 87 as Em was finished collecting water and resetting everything.

He was intentionally bright and sunny, expertly masking his unease.

Together, they headed to level 89 and finished her tasks there.

Em asked, "Did you finish for the day?"

"Sure did, kiddo," Gary said as he smiled.

Em looked uncomfortable. "Um… then can I ask a favor?"

"Absolutely! Whatcha got in mind?" He answers, still smiling.

"We need fire fuel," Em answers, looking distressed. "We're running low on both dry vines and wet vines. We're running low on *all* vines. Will you help me collect, like a metric fuck ton of vines? With the two of us, we can get ahead of this problem! *Please??*"

Dez flies into the level as Em cries "*Please*", shudders, and replies, "Yes, whatever the kid asked, give it to her, just don't say *that* word, in *that* tone, in my proximity, for the rest of my natural life, I swear to god. *Ugh*." She shudders again.

"*~Dezzy~*" Gary coos, as he turns and notices her, immediately embracing and

cuddling her.

She smiles and leans into him.

He was the warmth that melted her frigid soul.

She was the iron that ran in his blood.

“Awesome, now we've got 3,” Comments Em, nodding to herself, confident they can gather enough vines with the three of them.

“Sure do, what’re we doing, Goldy?” mumbles Dez.

“We’re collecting vines for our fires. Level 55 has a lot of them,” she looks around the level. “There aren’t many around here, that’s for sure… Let’s head over there.”

“Sounds good.” Mumbles Dez, finally pulling away from Gary but still holding his hand as they all hoverboard to the exit.

After they filled Em’s cart on level 55, which took next to no time, Dez and Em headed back to Silver’s shelter to unload while Gary went to the meeting spot to see if the other two had made it there already.

Dez and Em quickly unloaded the cart and headed back to level 55, while Gary didn’t see the other two, so he headed back to 55.

They quickly loaded Em’s cart a second time and repeated the process, sending Gary to scout for Silver and Buddy while Dez and Em unloaded the cart once more.

By the third time they were unloading the cart and effectively filling the entire wet vine rack, Em was thoroughly suspicious of Silver and Buddy.

It was well past the meeting time, and they were MIA.

Things didn’t feel *wrong*; they felt… *suspicious*.

Em decided to go looking for the two herself.

Em flies to level 75 and starts shouting "SILVER!! BUDDY!!" as she starts circling her way up around the outside of the Tower.

"SSSIIILLLVVEERRRR!!!" She hollers, getting angry.

How *dare* her mother not respond when her child calls for her?

Up a level, she faintly hears Silver say, "Oh, **Crap."**

"Gotcha. WHERE HAVE YOU *BEEN*, OH **MOTHER OF MINE??"** Ember yells angrily as she cuts power to her board, lets it dip, powers it back on, and full burns over to where she heard Silver.

Using her thrust, she overshoots Silver's voice, which turns out to have been inside level 77.

As she passes, she sees two figures inside and some movement.

She pulls a wide U-turn, due to her speed, and by the time she arcs back around, Dez and Gary have caught up, and Silver and Buddy have come out of level 77.

Silver was red in the face, Buddy won't make eye contact, Dez won't stop pointing and laughing at Silver and Buddy, and Gary keeps running interference between Ember, Silver, and Buddy until the group gets back to Silver's shelter.

Arriving back at their shelter, Ember stomps into the room, leans against her workbench, and glares at Silver.

Dez walks past, breaking her eye contact, and says loudly, "Hey Em, CATCH!" and tosses her the bottle Tiny gave her. "There are some pills on the bottom, go ahead and take those, pronto kiddooo." She says, snapping her fingers and

pointing finger guns at Em as she talks.

Em's glare shifts from Silver to Dez, then to Gary, Buddy, Silver, Dez, then back to Silver. "Are we really not going to talk about it?"

Silver is staring at the floor, one arm gripping her other elbow, Buddy's lips are fully retracted into his mouth, Gary is barely restraining himself from full-on laughter, and Dez is eager to be the one talking.

"Talk 'bout *what*, kiddo? Your *hair?* Cuz Immaboutta style the *shit outta it*. Now take those pills and sit yo ass in front of me so I can work my *~magic~.*" She says with a sparkle in her eyes, a smile on her face, and wiggly fingers as she expertly drops to a cross-legged position from where she was standing.

Em's face shifts from angry to horrified as she looks around the room, this time looking for help rather than for a fight.

"Gary, sweetie, will you please run home and get me my hair bin? I forgot to grab it." Dez coos.

"You got it, baby," Gary says, kissing her on the top of her head before heading to the exit.

Em rushes to him, clawing his arm and looking up at him in desperation, "Don't leave me with her," she pleads.

Gary laughs a full belly laugh. "What do you expect me to do? She's my *queen*, she knows what's best." He tussles Em's hair inside her bonnet, dislodges her claws, walks her to Dez, presses her shoulders for her to sit, waits for her to begrudgingly oblige, grumbling as she sits in front of Dez, then leaves.

Dez then calls out to the two awkward ones in the room, "Hey, lovebirds-"

"*LOVEBIRDS?*"

Echoes Ember, appalled.

"Child, you heard me. Lovebirds, go scout the level, make sure

whatever burned all those vines for the other night is gone for good, will you?"

"Uh, yeah, sure." Says Silver.

Buddy nods a little too fast, and they bump into each other on the way out the door.

Dez takes the bottle out of Em's tightly gripped hands and begins wiggling it back and forth in front of her face until Em snatches it again.

After Em snatches it, she angrily rips the pills off of the bottom, throws them in her mouth, rips off the cap, and downs the whole bottle of water.

She then crumples the bottle and throws it across the shelter.

Dez gently takes the bonnet off Em's hair. "What're you so mad about, Goldy? I thought you *liked* Buddy. Don't you want your *Mommy* to be *happy*?"

Em shifts, uncomfortable

"I..." she sighs, "I *dooo*. But... I don't want her to... not be *mine* anymore. I want her to be **my** Mom and be **my** Mom *first*. If she and Buddy start dating... won't they be like you and Gary? Where you guys put each other first?"

Dez has the bonnet off and has been stroking Em's hair, not brushing it yet, just playing with it, smoothing it out, beginning to work in some moisture with a spray bottle.

"Oh, honey, you know that isn't *true*, don't you? You know the *only* reason we put each other first is because we don't have a little version of us... a, uh... a little *you*... yet." Dez brushes her hand across Em's hair again. "The moment two parents have a kid, it's the parents' job to put the kid before themselves. Think of it like this, hun. You're not *losing* a Silver, you're *gaining* a Silver.

"Now Buddy is your Silver

Junior. Because you know if he doesn't act right, Silver is gonna beat his ass *and* you're gonna beat his ass *and* Imma beat his ass *and* Gary gonna beat his ass." She says, tickling Ems' sides, making Em giggle. "Silver isn't going *anywhere*. Understand me?"

Em leans back against Dez and whispers, "You promise?"

Dez whispers back, "I pinky swear. In fact... can you keep a secret?"

"Yeah?" Em tilts her head back, looking at Dez, suddenly her eyes grow wide "SECRET! Gary owes me a secret!"

At that time, Gary re-enters the room, carrying a medium-sized box.

Em lifts her head upright and points at him as she says, "Bitch you owe me a secret."

"A secret?" Gary says, confused.

"From before, at the water tarps." Em reminds him.

Gary thinks about it, "Oh yeah. The secret was that there is no secret."

Em's mouth falls open in shock.

Dez laughs. "Don't worry, kid, he got me with that one time too, but it only works once."

Em looks at Dez, "What was *your* secret?"

"Ooooo, we're trading secrets without me? *Spill, gurl,* what are we talking 'bout?" Gary teases.

"I... well, I had to go to Tiny today, right? For the pills?" Dez says, faster than necessary.

"Yeah...?" Gary says, Slower than necessary.

"She said, to let her know if I needed anything else, and I said I did, well, **we** did, and **we** would be back in a few days, to, you know, ask for it, and I just wanted to let her know, you know, ahead of time, in case, you know, in case she needed to know in

advance, and maybe… I *might* have maybe told her… To maybe set it in stone…? So we couldn't back out… so ***I*** couldn't back out…" Dez sputtered through her explanation, staring at the floor, and trailed off when Gary wasn't talking.

Instead of talking, he was listening intently, staring at her, listening to her words, her tone, her body language, her face.

When she finally looked at him, he smiled, wide and reassuring.

He raised his hand and caressed her cheek.

"I love you, Dez. I am so excited for whatever comes next." Then he kissed her.

Ember had no idea what they were talking about. She just knew they were being *annoying*.

"*Ewwwww,* **gross.** You guys are GROSS. When are Silver and Buddy coming back? They are less gross than you guys." Em pouted.

Gary put his forehead to Dez's, and without breaking contact, turned to look at Em. "Don't be surprised if they start kissing too, now."

Em gagged. "I hate you all."

"Who's kissing?" Asks Buddy as he and Silver enter the room. Em glared at him.

"You." She seethed.

He froze in place as he was walking, "I'm, I'm what, I'm in trouble or I'm kissing? Help me out."

Silver instinctively froze at first, then, as Buddy panicked, she couldn't help but laugh.

At his request for help, she turned to him, grabbed the front of his shirt, and kissed him in front of everyone, leading to Ember yelling angrily, Dez whooping, Gary laughing, and Buddy having what Silver would not stop referring to as 'adorable

anxiety’ for the rest of the night.

Dez combs Em's hair while Em instructs Gary on how to train Isaac for her so that Isaac doesn't miss a day of training, and Gary was happy to be introduced to the theories of Behaviorism.

Isaac and Gary began working on getting Isaac to shake hands the way enforcers always shake hands with people.

That way, he could be properly civilized.

Once Isaac had mastered that skill, Gary floated the idea of teaching him Left and Right.

They tried the idea, and it seemed to work, but it didn't stick.

Isaac seemed to have burnt his mental energy for the day.

While Dez is combing Em's hair, Gary asks Buddy, "Have you guys really never addressed the hair problem before? What's going on with that?"

"We don't get friendly with many people. Tiny cuts it short as necessary, and Em's never complained or shown any interest in it, so there haven't been many reasons to look for a change." Buddy replies with a shrug.

"It bothered Silver a lot, though; she felt like she should get to dress up like other little girls used to. Even though Em has never shown much interest in doing stuff with her hair, like pigtails or anything. She usually just fluffs up her hair when she looks at herself in the mirror. From what I've noticed, when it gets long, she seems to get frustrated with it *more*.

"I think Silver thinks it's because she's never known any other way, but I think if she were curious about other ways, she would have tried experimenting with other ways.

"Like she would have played with it by flattening it out, or putting it in pigtails or something like that, right?

Then asking how it looks? I don't know... I guess we'll see, though, right?" he says, with a shrug. "I really hope they don't go through a whole bunch of hassle and have her hate it." He says with a deep frown.

Gary genuinely laughs at that. "Bro, have you seen my woman? She knows hair, your kid is in good hands."

When Gary says, 'your kid,' Buddy looks up in shock, then looks at the ground and smiles.

When Dez declares herself to be halfway through the last half of combing Em's hair, Buddy gets dinner for everyone while Silver picks up the shelter, and Gary organizes the hair products that have been used or will be used, and organizes Dez's hair care box.

Dez leans down and whispers in Em's ear, looking at Gary, "See that? It's the little stuff that matters the most. My hands are gonna hurt after all this hair care, and when you get older and start doing it for yourself, your hands are gonna hurt, too.

"Having someone who helps out in the little ways so you won't have to use your hands even a little bit extra goes a long way. Pay attention to someone who loves you like that.

"Anyone can make big gestures, but after a while, the big gestures always stop. The little gestures are the ones that last forever."

Dez sits back up and continues staring at Gary, smiling idly as she continues gently feeling her way through combing Em's hair. Louder, she says, "I love you, Gooey," and blows a kiss at him.

Gary gets embarrassed at the nickname, looks at Em, who is very unhappy with all the gushy romance going on, and fake whispers, "*Not in front of the kids, Dezz*," with a big smile.

Em responds, loudly, **"Yeah, not in front of the kidsss, Dezzz,** Gawd, I don't think I can **take** any more, *ugh*. You guys

make me *sick*."

Buddy passes out dinner, and everyone sits down with their reports. Dez goes first so she can still work on Em's hair while she reports.

"Level 95, clear, level 96 mix of very old void and very new cocoons. When I say very new cocoons, they were still talking and in the process of losing limbs." Dez says while cringing.

Gary rubs her back. "Oh shit, hun, I'm sorry."

"Level 97, clear." Dez finishes.

"Damn, and you did another level, and still saw Tiny, bad ass bitch right here," Gary says, laughing.

Dez smiles and holds up her hands, offering for Silver to take over the combing and conditioning while she cleans her hands and gets ready to write everyone else's reports.

Silver swaps out, Dez washes her hands, and Silver reports.

"76 had a trap; the level was full of void, but they left about 3 cubic meters of open space around the entrance so that something might wander in. It freaked me out." Silver says, biting her lip with worry.

"Level 77 was clear." She finishes and gets up to wash her hands. "I know this means I have 3 levels to clear tomorrow. Don't worry, I'll get them done."

Dez responds, "Oh sweetie, we're not worried, or mad," she says with a wink.

Buddy waits for Silver to be done washing her hands so that he can start giving his report, and Em sneakily reaches for the bonnet, mistakenly thinking that if she can get the bonnet on, she'll be done with hair care for the night.

When Silver returns to the group, Buddy reports, "Level 83, the level at which the incident occurred, showed no signs of damage." He sat quietly while this sank in.

Silver was shocked, and Dez said, “Okay, so?”

Silver turned to her, “No, you don’t get it. The whole floor broke open under us, and walls were falling off the Tower.” She turned to Buddy, “*No* damage? What do you mean?”

He looked at Silver, “*No damage*. None. 84 was full of void and started reaching for me as soon as I got near it. That’s when I ran looking for you.” He hung his head. “I was scared.”

Em glared at him out of the side of her eye. “You were scared, so you boned my mom?”

Dez ugly laughed, Gary tried not to laugh and failed, Silver snickered but said “Em, rude.” And Buddy scooted to move Silver between him and Em, who continued to glare at him.

Dez recovered first. “But what does that mean? Did the Tower just… automagically fix itself?”

Buddy shrugs behind Silver, “I really don’t know how it could happen. I even started to doubt that it *did* happen for a bit, but how else could we have gotten Isaac? And Silver was there with me, so I didn’t just imagine it…”

Silver leans back into Buddy. “You didn’t imagine anything, don’t do that to yourself.”

The group was silent for a moment, then Gary reported next, “Pretty sure I got all y'all beat. Level 88, trap, level 89 clear, level 90, **what** the ever-living *fuck*? The Tower fucking *moved*.” He said as he stared at everyone.

Dez looked at him for a moment, then said “fukkn wut?”

“I know, it's weird. But level 90, the entrance wasn’t by the statue. It was halfway down the Tower, in the middle of the air.

“It was half the size it should be, but it was crooked, and… it didn’t look right.

“And there was a, sort of like, groaning coming from inside, and it felt like the wind was trying to push me in.

“So I noped the hell out of there, found the kid, and stood guard with her. I made sure that for the rest of the day, she’s had someone with her.” He replied.

“Holy shit, thank you so much, Gary,” Silver whispers, her eyes wide, face pale.

Dez reaches over and hugs him. “That’s my man, what a good father figure.” She says as she kisses him on the cheek.

When the color returns to Silver's face, she scrunches it up and asks, “How are we supposed to report that? Captain will think we’re crazy.”

“Who cares *what* he thinks, as long as we all say the same thing. What’s he going to do, leave his cushy office and go check?” She says, as she snorts.

Silver and Buddy look at each other.

Silver began wondering then if the Captain actually checked the work he consistently docked them for when it was ‘not up to his standards’.

Judging from what Dez was saying, it was all talk.

That pig was sin itself.

Now that she stopped to think about it, she has never once seen the Captain or any other enforcers anywhere other than the office.

She and Buddy shrug, writing the event in their logs.

Once the logs were updated, Dez packed up her things and unpacked the hair care products that *mysteriously* got packed up into her hair box in the wrong places, mind you.

The products had gotten mysteriously packed up while the child was not actively being attended to.

Dez chuckles, then grabs the child by the upper arms in a death grip when she sees her sitting nearby playing with the ends of her *silk* bonnet as a toy to play with the puppy.

She lifts the child into her lap, giving her arms another squeeze once she was settled in her lap to show she was serious.

She then whispers in her ear **"Girl**. If I ever inspect this bonnet with my magical special tools and find so much as a *thread* of evidence that this *expensive imported and rare silk* has been used as a *cheap dogs chew toy,"* she turns Ember by the chin with one finger to look Dez in the eye and shakes her head while making eye contact.

Ember nods.

"Good, now for the fun stuff!" Dez smiles and claps, pulling out a medium-sized mirror, turning on a light that wraps around the edge, and hands it to Ember.

Ember is immediately infatuated; she loves mirrors, especially since they were so rare.

Ember immediately starts looking at herself from all sorts of angles.

"We got all the knots out and we've got some body to work with," Dez says, fluffing up Em's hair as she talks, "so we have some options."

Dez looks up as she starts to name off all the styles she could imagine dressing Em up in, "We can do finger coils, or a high puff, both of those would be really cute, I can show you how to do mini bantu knots, to keep it protected, we could cut in a mohawk some time when you're feeling something *spicy*.

"We could twist it, or do finger waves, you're pretty tender... so we're not touching anything tight..." she trailed off, mumbling, "If we had a wig, we could do a frontal ponytail..."

Em's mouth has fallen open, and her eyes are lit up like a

bonfire is shining out from behind them.

'She has no idea what any of these are,' Dez reminds herself, as she chuckles, shaking her head. 'But *damn*, she's so *excited*.'

Dez claps and says, "Okay, okay, okay, let's start here, do you want *volume?"* She puffs Em's hair up on the top of her head, "or do you want *length?"* she asks, as she pulls her hair down by her cheekbones.

Ember shifts from looking at her face to looking at her hair. "Uuummm..." She shifts the mirror up high, shifts it down low, low low, high high, too high, and Dez laughs.

"Okay, kid, here's what we're working with. Let's start simple, 2 options: classic puff or finger coils. Fairly easy, and you should be able to do them yourself with some practice." Dez says, chuckling.

"I want both. Can we do both?" Em asks, tilting her head back to look at Dez.

Dez starts laughing, "We can do both *eventually,* which do you want to do *first,* Goldy. Length, aka the finger coils, will really only keep your hair around your head; with your hair right now, it might get as far as your cheekbones. The finger coils will give you something to fidget with if you're a fidgeter. The high puff will go up to about here," she holds her hand a little above where Em's hair is currently, "and you can wear pretty scarves around it to match your outfits."

Ems face lights up "Ooo pretty scarves..."

Dez laughs "Okay we have a winner. Now for the high puff, just so you know, normally when you do this you only need to spray your hair with a little water to get it damp, and you can apply some product," she leans in and whispers in her ear *"product being moisturizer in this case"* then leans back out and continues "if and only if your

hair is dry and brittle, but in this case your hair needed the product," she leans in and whispers *"deep conditioner"* and leans back out again, leaving Em giggling "because your hair was a freaking mess. Got it?" She asks with a tickle.

Em screams and flops to the floor.

Dez keeps tickling Em, "Get up, Goldy, we have work to do!" She teases as she tickles her.

Dez breaks from tickling her to pick her back up to sitting position again, and starts showing her how to slick her hair back in the mirror. She instructs her to begin slicking her hair back like she showed her while she grabbed some headbands for her to keep.

She grabbed 5 headbands, 10 large ponytail holders for the child to keep, curl-enhancing cream, gel, a bottle of Carol's Daughter Goddess Strength leave-in conditioner, moisturizer, hair oil, butter, a brush for her edges, and a spray bottle for water.

When she turned around, the child had her puff damn near perfect.

"Well, ho-le-shit kid, look at your picture-perfect puff. Here, now you do this."

She put the headband and hair tie in her lap and held the kid's hair for her. "Grab the hair tie." The kid let go of her puff and grabbed the band, "Now put this top part through the hair tie, just enough to keep it in place, okay?"

"I'm gonna let go of your hair, and it might feel like it's falling a little, but that's okay. When you're doing this alone, that's how this is gonna go, okay?"

"Okay." Em said in her monotone, focused voice, while she got the tie situated in her hair.

Dez checked that the hair tie was in correctly, gave Ember a little squeeze, and let go,

ready to prep Em for the next stage.

“Now, we’re going to put on the hairband, ready? Open it over your head, probably a little wider than you expect to need it to be, and get it around your neck.” Dez leaned back on her hands to give Em the space to get the headband on.

Em hesitated, took a deep breath, then panicked as she rushed to put the headband on, dragging it over her head and pulling the hair tie mostly out in the process.

Em whimpered when her hair was pulled down.

The panic in her process made Dez giggle and squeeze her shoulders. “*Relax*, kid. Woosa. Breathe. Take your time.” Dez said, chuckling.

Em took in a deep breath and let it out. She started smoothing up the sides of her puff again, trying to get it exactly right. When she had it how she thought she had it before, they put the hair tie back in, and Em looked to Dez, asking, “Now what?”

“Now you pull up the headband to keep the sides in place.” Answered Dez, smiling.

Em let go with one hand, trying to keep one hand on the puff at all times.

“Girl, *relax*, put on the headband with both hands, and you’ll see. It’ll be fine. Trust me. It’ll work out.” Dez said, calmly.

Em lolled her head back, looking at Dez’s hair. She noticed Dez was also wearing a high puff.

She stood up and examined the top of Dez’s high puff and found it braided and adorned with wooden beads in a mesmerizing pattern that left Em in awe.

Dez turned her head from side to side, showing off the work she had put into her hair. She then turned her head up to look at Em, saying, “This is why bonnets

are important. Girl, you think I could do this shit *every single day??* Now get back down here, we ain't done with you."

Sitting back down, Em took a deep breath, finally took both hands off her high puff, grabbed her headband, and slid it, gently, up over the top of her head.

Dez's hands stopped Ember's when they were about to go too far.

She handed Em the mirror.

As soon as Em saw herself, she immediately turned and launched herself into Dez's arms, nearly in tears.

Dez couldn't stop laughing. She accepted the hug for nearly a minute before sitting Em back down, saying, "*Almost,* okay, Goldy? We're *almost* done."

Silver and Buddy were behind them at Em's workbench, glued to the scene in front of them, holding their breath, afraid to make any noise, while Gary played loudly with Isaac.

Dez scooched in front of Em, grabbing the brush she had selected to give Em for her edges, and some of her own gel that she was *not* going to leave behind tonight, and started styling her.

Then she showed Em the magic trick, to use floss to smooth out wet, damp, or gelled hair into picture-perfect smoothness, and how to do the edges in 4 separate ways, then how to make up new styles.

First, though, she had to remove the child's hands from her head.

She seemed to think her head was about to fall off for some reason.

Once she was done styling her, she handed Em the mirror again, and the reaction was to die for.

Em froze, her jaw dropped, and she slowly reached out and touched the mirror.

Once her fingers made

contact with the mirror, she slowly touched her own hair, teared up, shook her hands, and screamed quietly, flapping her hands uncontrollably.

Dez stared at Em and thought ‘Hey, look, she took her hands off her head’ as she chuckled at Em’s obvious excitement.

Em then got up and ran around the small shelter on her tippy toes, screaming slightly louder, still flapping her hands, and going up to each person over and over showing them again and again and showing them how to do it and asking Dez to show them how to do the edges, and asking Dez to show her how to do the edges again, and asking again to double check what the edges were called.

The word edges got used more times that night than it ever had been used before.

Em waved Dez and Gary off for the night.

Before they had left, Dez made sure to check her hair box for the mirror for the millionth time, certain the kid would have tried to steal it, but she didn't.

This surprised Dez.

She was now intent on getting that child a mirror of her own, price be damned.

After all, she would need one for her edges.

The thought made Dez smile as she and Gary flew home.

Chapter 10

Buddy wakes at sunrise again, gets the house ready, and wakes up his family.

This time, he decides to wake up Silver with a kiss on the forehead, which is apparently too soon to do, because she responds immediately by punching him in the face and panicking, which makes him laugh.

Hey, she's up and moving, isn't she?

He then goes to the kiddo and starts poking the new puff on her head.

On the second puff poke, she immediately sits straight up and stares him dead in the face, eyes wide. "No Touchy. The Picture. Perfect. Puffy." She says, vewy angy.

"Um, sorry kiddo. But overnight, the fantastic triple P might've gotten messed up. You'll have to redo it." Buddy says, regretfully. "Did you remember to put the bonnet on before bed…?"

"MY **EDGES**???" Em cries, her hands flying to her head.

"NO, NO NO! No, sweetie, your edges stayed. Somehow, I don't know how, but those are fine; it's just the puff that is all frizzy, you know, on the sides? Where yesterday it was smooth, right? Dez said this might happen. She said just smooth it out like she showed you, with the floss? And maybe touch it up a little bit? And you'll be good to go." He hurries to explain.

She looks relieved, then shoots him an angry glare.

She gets up and announces "I *need* a *mirror*. I'm going to Tiny's" and heads for the door.

Only to be stopped by the sight of her own reflection, being held by Dez's mirror at Em's height. "Sup, kid, wanna borrow mine instead? You got 5 min."

Em rushes forward and hugs Dez, rubbing her forehead against her shoulder while

she baby talks her, trying to make her mom jealous.

"*~Dezzz~, I love yew so much, never leave meeeee.*"

Dez hugs her back and whispers in her ear, "tick tock tick tock"

Em grabs the mirror and runs away.

"Damn, Silver, you're up early. *Whoaaaah*, Buddy, what happened to your *face*? You good, bro? We didn't just walk in on a domestic, did we?" Dez asks. Gary raises his eyebrows and points to his own face while Dez asks.

Buddy's cheek was still notably red from where Silver had punched him.

Buddy laughs as Silver eyes him grumpily.

"It was his fault, anyway." She says, pouting.

Her pouting makes him laugh harder while he explains, "I kissed her forehead to wake her up, and apparently she forgot about... well." And he shrugs.

Dez face palms. "Yeah, you did deserve it. Kid! Time to go! Your parents are weirding me out!"

"Join the club!" Em remarks as she runs over as she zips her mini-duffel.

She strapped Isaac into her cart and they were ready to go.

Joining Dez and Gary at the doorway, she hands the mirror back to Dez, her fantastic triple P in pristine condition.

As they leave, Ember turns around and looks at Buddy, then sticks out her tongue.

Turning back to Dez and Gary, she grabs both of their hands, and says, "Let's go!"

Silver and Buddy hang back a second, watching them walk away.

Silver leans over to Buddy and says, "This is just a phase, right?"

“Which part?” He asks.

“The ‘I choose them’ part.” She says, eyes locked on the hand holding.

“Oh yeah, 100%.” He says, leaning back against Silver, watching them go.

Gary initiates a swing between the three of them, where Dez and Gary try to pick up Em and swing her.

At first, Em is confused, not knowing what’s going on.

Gary leans down to explain.

Em makes some nodding gestures, and they try again.

The two adults pick up Em as she tucks her knees as high as they will go, and they manage to swing her a short distance before Dez almost falls over, and the three of them laugh together.

“Do you think they’re gonna ask Tiny to have a kid? Wait- what part did you think I meant?” She turns to look at him.

“Oh, for sure, they’re born to be parents. The world would be a better place if they were parents.” Buddy replies, nodding. “And I thought you meant the edges and the triple p and the other looks-based stuff. I was wondering if that was what you were worried about. How she suddenly just became fixated on her looks.”

Silver looks at the ground, sad. “Does… that mean they’re going to disappear, now?” She sighs. “And, I mean, she’s getting older; she’s allowed to love how she looks. Everyone should love how they look.”

Together, they watch the soon-to-be-parents reach the edge and hop onto hoverboards next to the new couple’s tweenage child.

The child in question turns around and flips them off as the adults stare at them questioningly before leaving with her.

“I hope they don’t disappear too soon. Where do you think they all go?” Silver asks. “Tiny

won't tell me. She says it's better if nobody knows."

Buddy looks at her, considering. "We could go, one day. The three of us."

Silver shakes her head sadly, "No, because of the same reason we haven't gone already. We don't know anything about the place, and they won't tell us anything before we commit to going. If they tell us anything at all... Better to stick with the demon you know, you know...?" Silver comments, sadly. "Plus, we don't know if they all go to the same place or if they go somewhere different... we could end up on the opposite end of the universe if we tried to follow them... there are just too many unknowns..."

"Em's going to be heartbroken when they leave." Buddy wraps his arm around Silver's waist and pulls her close.

Silver leans into his chest and nods.

Buddy kissed the top of her head before saying "C'mon, lets go pick up your board so we can get started."

Silver and Buddy decide to do their levels together today. They head to level 78, find it to be another trap level, mark it, and move up to level 79.

As they enter, they both note that it's surprisingly empty; however, as Buddy turns to leave, Silver mentions, "It might have a garden." She says, looking to the side.

"A... what?" Buddy asks, turning to look at her.

"You know, those things the animal tenders used to be able to have small bits of, with dirt and green stuff." She says, gesturing stuff poking up, her hands at about waist height, with her hands.

"Oh... yeah..?" Buddy muses, "But... all the way up here? Have you been finding them?"

Silver looks to the side, "Kind of... I wasn't going to tell anyone... I'm pretty sure they belong to Tiny. What's weird, though?" She looks back at the level "Any level that has a garden *doesn't* have any void. Never does. It makes me wonder when they showed up, we've been patrolling these levels for *ages,* there were always issues." She makes a face as she thinks about this, "I wonder when it changed."

Buddy nods, "It must have been recent..."

Silver stares at the walled off corner across the level "Let's check the outside."

Silver leads the way, heading outside to the opposite corner from the entrance, and there it is.

Another garden, roughly the same size as the others she had been finding.

"See?" She says as she slows to a halt.

"Well, I'll be damned," Buddy says as he pulls up next to her, looking inside the knocked-down walls. "Is that a tree?"

Buddy slowly drifts around the outside of the garden,

wondering if he could ask Tiny to grow his herbs here...

“Yeah, some levels have trees, some don’t. It’s a whole operation. Let’s... not...? Tell anyone... okay?” Silver looks at Buddy, worried.

Buddy gently nudges her board with his board, “No worries here.” He laughs, “You think I want to invoke the wrath of Tiny? Not a chance.”

They move on to level 80, find it filled to the brim with void starting about 2 meters into the entrance, mark it, and move up to Buddy’s levels.

As they fly up Silver comments, “Seeing this much void a handful of days ago would have been... jarring to say the least... but now?”

Buddy nods “It’s almost expected... How much do you think there is, really?”

Silver stared straight ahead, her eyes unfocused as she flew.

Her stomach hurt when she thought about it.

She slowly shook her head in disbelief.

Level 84 had more old void bubbles lining the corners inside the level, with a handful of semi-fresh cocoons in one room.

The cocoons had begun to clump together, so it was difficult to tell how many humans they used to be.

Level 85 was mostly walled off, leaving a small section inside of the Tower that was available from the entrance.

When checking the outside, the majority of the level was a garden. They marked it as a level that was clear and filled with rubble.

Level 86 was entirely full again, and this time the void was spreading out outside of the level, into the sunlight.

Sunlight was supposed to be one of the void's natural

enemies, but this level seemed unaffected by it.

If anything, it seemed to be growing towards the sunlight.

They marked the information and moved on to level 85, another garden.

They began to notice that the gardens were only on the odd levels.

Interesting.

Level 86 was another full level with a gap at the entrance. This void appeared to be avoiding sunlight, unlike the other level.

Was it a trap? Or was this void the normal void they were used to?

Something bothered Silver about this level, and they did a lap around the outside.

What they found disturbed them.

The void was leaving a gap at the entrance of the levels, blending into the shadows.

But in places not visible from the entrance on this and all the other levels, the void was growing out of the concrete, reaching out like vines growing into sunlight as it blossomed.

Level 84 was the only one that was growing into the light by the entrance.

They marked it as ‘fucked’ and went to level 98 to meet the other half of their party.

Gary, Dez and Em cleared 91 easily, as it was empty aside from some rubble piled in the corners.

Moving up to level 92, they found another trap level and kept moving without hesitating. Level 97 still looked clear on their drive by, and they didn't slow down until level 98, where Em started to complain.

"Aren't you guys supposed to be checking these levels??" Em whined.

"Kid, you're the only one who comes up here for purposes that aren't nefarious, and the rest of the Tower can suck my nuts.

"Cappy isn't coming up here any time soon, so he'll believe whatever we say, and we need to check out this 'The Tower Is Fucking Moving' bullshit," Dez responds as they get near level 98 and pulls out her notebook to write the information about the levels they sped past while waiting for Gary to notice what she noticed.

"It's *doing it* agaaain, Dez," Gary said, voice cautious.

"I saw. That's why I stopped. I wanted to catch up on the easy notes before resorting to 'fucked' until we add more detail tonight." Dez says as she puts away her notebook and puts it into her bag.

Em wobbles her board under her uncomfortably as she stares at the entrance to level 98. "Hey guys... where's uh... where's the entrance?"

She looked along both sides of the wall, not seeing the entrance anywhere on the Tower.

The door wasn't where it was supposed to be, it wasn't hanging in midair, and it wasn't anywhere around the building that they were able to find as they did a full lap around it.

"Kid... you should go home," Dez says, looking at Em, face serious.

Em looks uncomfortable,

anxious, and angry. “I… I *can’t*. I couldn’t handle it if anything happened to you guys.” Her face lights up. “Besides! I brought more salt bombs, just in case!” She says, pulling her mini-duffel in front of her and unzipping it.

She thinks for a moment, “Silver and Buddy… should we go get them?” Em asks, worried.

“We’re just going to log this and move on, okay, guys? We’ll wait for them at the next meeting point.” Gary says, voice serious. “We can’t do anything else with…” He glances at Em, “all of us, here.”

“Agreed,” Dez says, and logs the lack of door.

They proceed to level 99 to wait for the rest of the party, who would probably be doing their jobs, annoyingly.

That would make them all wait a little bit longer.

Buddy and Silver arrived after not too much time, and together the five of them cleared level 99, which was empty, and headed to the statue on level 100 to head towards the door.

But, the door wasn’t there.

Doing a lap around the Tower, they found the entrance hanging in midair on the side of the Tower, sagging slightly between level 100 and 99.

They pull up to the base of the 3-meter statue that marked the corner of level 100.

Ember looked up at the bronze statue, which was of a woman in a thick fur suit holding a spear. She had her lantern on the ground in front of her, surrounded by solar panels.

Her plaque read “Akycha, Inuit Sun Goddess”.

They gathered by the statue to talk about what they had each seen, or rather, not seen.

As Ember floated by the base of the statue, she heard metal groaning.

She looked up towards the noise, seeing the statue turning to look down.

Her stomach fell out of her ass with the groan of creaking metal as it reached out and down, reaching directly for her as Isaac barked furiously from his hovercart.

Silver heard the metal groaning, saw it moving, and immediately began dashing towards Ember, chanting "What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck" as she flew.

When she crashed into Ember, she started yelling "***Move, Move, MOVE MOVE MOVE KID!! NOW!!! WE HAFTA GO! LIKE FUCKING NOW LIKE WE HAVE TO GO LIKE FUCKING NOW!!!"***

"Got it, got it, got it, going, going, going," Em responds, frantic as she catches her balance and pushes her board forward.

They flew forward, Dez finding her way to the front of the pack.

She lead them along the wall of the level away from the statue, stopping at the next corner to examine the situation.

As they gathered at the corner of the Tower, they turn to look back at the statue as they tried to figure out what the fuck was happening.

The 3-meter-tall metal statue had stepped off her platform, walked past the lantern seated on the ground, and then braced her legs in a fighting stance as she brandished her spear in front of her towards where they had been hovering at its base.

Only her head moved, her emotionless metal face continuing to stare at Ember.

The group hovered in place, frozen in fear.

As they took in the sight in front of them, they noticed cracks in her joints, turning her into a hollow bronze puppet.

She remained still while black ooze began leaking out

from these cracks.

The ooze did not drip; instead, it sagged from the cracks, then began to reach out into the world around it, as though it was smelling the air.

The void was... puppeting the statue?

Slowly the void turned in their direction and began to pull itself back, preparing to launch itself at the group.

“NOPE! WE ARE *NOT* STOPPING HERE! Time to go!

Go, go go go” Dez’s voice begins as a whisper, as she progressively gets louder, “GO GO **GO GO FUCKING *GO,* *GO TO THE SHELTER FUCKING NOW!!!”*** She ends by screaming at the group, pushing everyone one by one, away from the Tower and the statue, starting with Ember.

One by one, they snap out of their panic, and book it for the shelter. Ember's board seemed to stall out for a moment giving Silver existential dread.

Then, somehow, Ember was moving faster than the rest of them.

Silver didn’t dare pull her ripcord, fearing it would separate her from Ember.

Less than a minute later, they had all arrived at the shelter, trailing in behind Ember, finding her alternating between grabbing the sides of her hair like she usually does when she freaks out, then realizing it was styled, then trying to smooth it out again.

She repeated this cycle while pacing back and forth in the shelter.

Isaac is watching her from the cart, thumping his tail softly, his ears pinned down

to the side of his head, whining softly.

Gary removes Isaac from the cart, and as he picks him up Isaac licks at his chin.

Gary kisses the top of his head before setting him down.

Silver walks in and immediately pulls Ember into a tight bear hug.

Ember hugs her back, holding tight.

Isaac sits at their feet, leaning against Em, thumping his tail softly.

Dez comes up from on the side of them and wraps her arms around both of them.

Buddy and Gary join the group hug, and for a moment they all stand there, holding Em.

After a moment, Em spoke up, "Okay, but actually*, what the ever-living fuck*?"

Still holding on, everyone spoke at the same time:

"I *know*, right?" Silver said, squeezing her tighter.

"Girl, you froze so hard the darkest thing on your face was your Goldy Tattys," Dez said, laughing as she rubs her forehead against Em's puff.

Gary shook his head, rubbing it in synch against Dez's hair. "I would like to opt out of that experience for the rest of my life, please. This is my formal request."

Buddy just shook his head and buried his head against Silver's neck and shoulders. "Let's never do that again."

As they all step apart, Silver asks, "Okay… so how do we report this?"

Dez shrugs, "You guys put *way* too much work into this. Cappy *does not care*. He *is* ***not*** *going to check on this*. Just say 'statue came alive, tried to grab us, had void leaking out of it, we fled.' End of report."

Ember shivers noticeably. "You know what? It fukkn

works for me, write that shit and let's put this whole thing behind us, jesus christ." She begins to smooth out her Picture Perfect Puff again, and after feeling so many stray hairs, she begins to look for her new comfort item, floss.

Silver looks at her and laughs, "What the hell – **kid**, it isn't your report to write."

Em looks shocked and angry. "Me. It tried. To grab. ME. I don't give a damn whose report it is to write, I'm freaking 9 years old about to be 10 by the way, *thank youuu* ~don't forget~ But I'm *pretty sure* **the one it <u>went after</u>** can say: '*Fuck* **that** shit, let's put it behind us!'"

Silver shrugs with her whole face, hands, arms, and shoulders. "You know what, kids got a point. Let's do the damn report and get this behind us." She kisses Em on the top of her head, avoiding the messed-up puff, "And I would never forget your birthday, especially your awesome double digits." She whispers softly.

Dez looked thoughtful. "Double digits, huh? *Okayyy*." She looked at Gary, and together they nodded.

They all pulled out their report sheets, quickly organized their reports, broke out dinner, and called it a night.

Gary, Em and Isaac started playing together.

They kept working on 'Stay' and Shake, which had officially turned into Left and Right!

That night, Isaac even learned Roll Over!

Dez pulled Silver aside, pulled out a fresh notebook, and they spent the rest of the night huddled in the corner with Dez gesturing with her hands a lot, mostly around her head, Silver nodding, asking questions or confirming, then both of them writing in the book.

Buddy sat against the wall, and tuned out the world,

turning inward.

He cleared his mind, enjoying the sounds of his family in the background.

He began to focus on his breath, letting his thoughts flow while intentionally letting go of any attachment he held towards any of them.

Thoughts began flowing like a river, thoughts and memories of him and Silver came and went, her touch, her smile.

Followed then by the fear of loss, his concern of losing his newfound family to the statue weeping void in front of them, reaching for his new child.

The acknowledgment that Ember was his child and that in that moment he had been prepared to die for her, as well as an inner struggle to rank his priorities between Silver and Ember.

They were a package deal; when would he ever have to worry about choosing between them, anyway?

He felt knuckles on the top of his head and found the child knocking on his head, as though she were knocking on a door.

Dez and Gary had left, and Silver was re-reading the notebook she and Dez had been pouring over.

“Mind if I join?” Ember asks as she takes a seat next to him, getting comfortable.

“Of course not, I love having you around.” He responds, smiling.

Ember calls over Isaac, who lays his head on her lap again as she closes her eyes.

About ten seconds later, she opens them again, looks at Buddy, and asks, “Okay, remind me, what am I doing?”

He laughs and explains, “You’re trying to give your mind space to relax and breathe.

“Today, for me, this starts with focusing on my breathing.

“Then I am intentionally detaching any possession over my thoughts, allowing them to flow *out* of my mind as easily as they pop *in*to my head.”

Em makes a face. “I guess I can try that.”

They sit together in silence for five whole minutes.

Buddy is genuinely impressed.

Em then turns to Buddy and asks, “Why do you do this? You obviously get something out of it. What is that?”

Buddy thinks for a second, “Well, it helps me relax. Do you feel more relaxed?”

Her face twists “A little, but I also feel… *more* stressed, you know?”

“That’s part of it, too. When you’re getting started, you aren’t used to letting the thoughts and feelings go, and it can make a lot of people anxious.

“Or, it could be that there is something else bothering you that hasn’t come to the surface yet, and you stopped too soon.” He says, with a shrug. “But, to me, this is the beginning of my Path.

“In Buddhism, there are the Four Noble Truths, and they lead to the Eight-Fold Path.

“Put simply, the Four Noble Truths are:

- Suffering exists
- Suffering has a cause
- Suffering has an end
- And, There is a right path to end that suffering

“Which, let's be real, this is a pretty dramatic way to think about it” He says, chuckling, “because the use of the word *suffering* can be anything from the enforcers trying to take you from Silver when you were 6, to you being a little thirsty after eating some duck.

“Both fall under the definition of suffering, because you are not perfectly aligned.

"'The Path' shows that there is a right path to correct that suffering, or, basic lack of alignment.

"Does that make sense?" He asks as he looks at Em. She seemed to be deep in thought, considering his words.

Her face turns grumpy "...no."

The unexpected honesty makes Buddy belly laugh and lean back against the wall. "Don't worry kid. It'll click some day."

"*Yeahhh*." She said, drawing out the word. She got up, "I... uh... I'm going over there now." She says as she and Isaac go over to Silver.

Buddy laughs, supposing that was a bit much to take in for a 9-year-old. And returned to meditating.

As they go to bed, Buddy hears Ember tell Isaac, "Stay, Good Boy. Stay with me." As she falls asleep, her fingers twisted in his fur.

The next morning, Buddy woke up at the crack of dawn, as usual.

He proceeded to get the house ready, but this time, when waking Silver up, he opted for the safer option and nudged her shoulder.

She immediately turned and looked at him, stared at him for two blinks, grabbed him, pulled him into her bed, and snuggled up against him. "Five more minutes, the kid isn't up yet," She said as she pulled him close.

"Well, she *fucking is now!* **Y'all are *disturbingly* gross.**" The child says as she gets up, having been woken up by the thud of Buddy landing in Silver's bed. "Oh, hey! *Ugh*, save me from them. Please."

Silver and Buddy look up from Silver's bed to see Dez and Gary standing at the door. Dez's face is quite unamused. "Very different morning than yesterday, it would seem. *Now Get The Fuck Up,* it's time to turn this

shit in and get *~paid~.”* Dez sings.

Chapter 11

Captain Kali sat in his office, reading from a laminated menu and writing his order on a piece of paper.

He selected several options of the meat with the highest contamination he could find that also masked it, some meat with experimental void bubbles sealed inside it, some samplings of contaminated gator meat that nobody would suspect, plus some fresh untainted exotic meat for himself that he was excited to try.

He was curious about why Zecoatl had been investing in people eating void.

Consuming the drug, that made sense to him.

But why would Zecoatl be so interested in people eating non-drug void? What could possibly come of that?

Especially that clear-ish grey void. That shit wasn't potent *at all*.

He folded his order inside the menu, sealed it within the waterproof envelope, and summoned Carol, the enforcer who still wore her damn rebreather everywhere she went, into his office.

He was *thrilled* for her to try the gator.

"Get this to Skit, would you? He knows what I like." He says, handing her the sealed envelope.

She looks uncertain but also knows better than to talk back.

Taking the envelope, she bows slightly and tries to leave his office. As she backs out, he asks her, "Any word from our friends who were doing recon on the twenty-five levels? I'm not waiting for them today. If they're not here by noon, I won't be seeing them."

She looks at the floor, uncomfortable with how often he changed the rules. "They haven't arrived, though the sun hasn't risen yet."

He scratches his chin.

"You're right. Noon is too generous. Let's give them one hour starting now. When they show up, *if* they show up, have them wait in the waiting room, then come into my office in this order." He hands her a sheet of paper.

She nods, accepts the paper, places it on top of the envelop and continues to back out of the room while bowing.

Twenty minutes later, shortly past sunrise, the group arrives with Ember and Isaac in tow.

She insisted they come and finish the job before she goes back to her normal, boring routine of collecting water and hunting for Tiny.

The rebreather enforcer is relieved when she sees the group. She didn't like seeing people punished when the rules were changed and they had no way to know.

However, when she notices Ember and Isaac in tow, her anxiety goes on high alert. "A *child*? You took a *child* on this job? That's **highly** irresponsible. Did you stop to think about what could have *happened* to her? You should have left her *safe* at *home* where someone could have been taking care of her, and- and- and- what about *school*? *Truency??* Isn't she missing days now because of **your *bad* decisions and *bad* parenting**?" She scolds Silver, clearly unaware of life on Ma.

Silver and Buddy keep a straight face, but Dez and Gary are cracking up and making no effort to hide it.

Meanwhile, Em fills with rage behind Silver as Isaac growls at her feet.

Ember steps forward, pushing past Silver as she seethes, "***Bad Parenting? School Days? Left at <u>Home</u>? Bitch,*** we don't have a ***Home***, we have a ***Shelter***. ***Home*** is where **you're *safe*.** In our shelter, we're *only safe*

when we're *all there,* **keeping *all of us* safe** *together!*

*"***How DARE** you accuse **My Mom** of being anything but **amazing**? She's the most ass kicking, face-bashing-"

She is cut off by Gary picking her up fireman carry over his shoulders and walking away with her laughing and saying, "*Okay* kid, she gets the point."

Isaac stops growling, his mouth hanging open in confusion as his girl is carted away.

Ember continues to yell at the enforcer as she's being carried away down the hall to Cappy's office.

Silver continues to stand in front of the rebreather enforcer, suppressing a smile and trying not to look behind the enforcer, towards her desk.

She says, "We're here to see Captain Kali, please."

Behind her, Dez silently makes faces, mocking the same sentence and making a gag gesture.

The rebreather enforcer

takes them back to where Gary was already sitting with Em, who silently fumed at the enforcer until she leaves the room again.

Carol has them sit and instructs them to enter the Captains' office in the order he requested.

As she returns to her desk in the other room, she sits at her desk-

immediately sitting in puppy piddle.

Isaac hears her scream from the other room as he waited with his girl.

He pants happily, wagging his tail as he lay down at Em's feet.

Silver enters the Captains' office first, reads off her report from her paper report, and places it on the Captains' desk.

All the while, he sits, elbows resting on his desk, hands folded in front of his mouth, becoming increasingly angry.

"Dismissed." He grumbles as she places the report on his desk.

She turns and marches out of his office.

As Buddy enters, the Captain pulls out a piece of roasted red meat from his drawer and places it on the table. He offers it to Buddy.

"Good morning, Adam." The Captain smiles and gestures to the meat on the table, "Just got this this morning. It's dehydrated fish from Mars.

"It was a work bonus for all the hard work *we* do here. Would you like a piece? It would be ***rude*** to say no." The Captain says, smiling.

Buddy looks at the piece of 'fish' on the table. "I'm not hungry, we already ate breakfast, and as a Buddhist, I musn't overindulge."

"Interesting. Well, trying some would be the *least* you could do, seeing as you *still* haven't *turned yourself in*. Hmmm?" The Captain said, smiling like a creep.

"Plus, they did say in the package that this was Vegan Fish. That *is* important to Buddhism, isn't it? You guys *aren't supposed to* eat meat, are you? May as well give it a taste." The Captain pushes the plate towards Buddy, his smile frozen in place.

Buddy pulls out his paper report, delivers the report verbally, places the paper report on top of the mystery meat, then dismisses himself, leaving the Captain fuming behind him.

Gary enters the Captain's office.

"Rodina v památníku Ondra.

How nice to see you again." The Captain says, his eyes narrowing.

Gary smirked and began to deliver his report without pulling out his notebook.

The Captain begins talking about the piece of meat on the table.

Gary continues delivering the report.

They begin talking over each other, each raising their voice to be louder than the other.

The voices rise, Gary is still delivering the report, and the Captain is still talking about the Vegan Fish.

The Captain stands up from behind his desk, beginning to shout.

Gary steps up to the table; they are now face to face, leaned over the table at each other, of equal height.

The Captain has more mass, and it's all pudge.

Gary takes the report out of his jacket and freebees it across the room, not breaking eye contact with the Captain.

Captain Kali backs off for a moment, thinking.

"I could have her killed, you know. I could take her away from you in the middle of the night, and you wouldn't ever be sure that it was me." The Captain says, looking at him from the corner of his eye.

Gary's face darkens, he smiles an evil smile.

He punches out, grabbing the front of the Captain's shirt collar and twists, yanking him forward.

Gary remains standing straight as he dragged the Captain across the table towards him, bringing them chest to chest.

Gary was choking him slightly with his grip on the collar of his shirt as he whispers in his ear, "Try it."

He then pushed the Captain back, using both arms to stand him upright, returning

him to standing behind his desk.

Gary exclaims, “Oh, Captain! What’s wrong!?! You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

Still holding the Captain, he smooths out the shoulders of the Captain's uniform.

As he left, he threw up the middle finger over his shoulder.

Dez is the last to enter, and Captain is still standing, smoothing out his shirt as she does.

She immediately starts giving her report, and he stands there, staring at her through the whole report, occasionally looking her up and down.

Such a *fine* woman, far too good to be wasted on that ‘Rodina’ fellow.

She should know better.

He should *teach* her to **know** better.

She keeps her eyes focused on the wall behind him, ignoring his creepiness.

When she finishes, he offers her the meat as well, and she, too, places her report on top of it.

Why the hell do these people keep doing that?

He sneered at her report, placed politely on top of his sinister offering.

He speaks as he stares at her report.

“I could have him killed, you know. I could take him away from you in the middle of the night, and you wouldn’t ever be sure that it was me.” He said, glaring at the report on the table.

She swallowed hard, and he smiled.

Finally, someone who respected him.

“If we don’t come to some sort of… *arrangement*…” He says, looking at her. He begins to walk around his

desk, getting close enough to touch her. “Things might get very… uncomfortable… for poor *Gary*.”

Dez looks at the floor.

Nods.

Looks up at Cappy through her eyebrows, reaches up towards his face, and flicks up his eyepatch, temporarily revealing his empty eye socket.

“Let’s not forget what happened last time you and I went down this route, *Cappy*. I believe my standing promise is that every body part you lose will be bigger than the last.” She stared at him in his only eye as she spoke.

She wasn’t even blinking.

What the hell was wrong with her.

He swallowed, cleared his throat, took a step backward towards the side of his desk, removed the meat from under the report, and held it up to her again while raising his eyebrows and smiling,

“Peace offering?”

Dez scoffed, turned, and left.

As they leave the back office and make their way into the front office, they find their child and the rebreather enforcer deep in something that resembles more of an interrogation than a conversation.

“Are they hurting you, sweetie? Are they forcing you to stay with them? Did they take you from your parents? Are they able to provide the basic necessities for you, things like candy, toys, games, books, TV, internet, hot meals, vitamins? How often do you eat fruits and vegetables. What about baths? Are they tucking you in? Are you **safe** here, with *them*? Do you have your own room? Does your door have a lock on it? Just in case?

“Maybe it *would* be better if you came to live with us, here. I know this office isn’t *ideal*, but we can offer most

of those things, I think you'll be *happier* here than off somewhere with *those* ***monsters****."*

While the rebreather enforcer is monologuing to Ember, Ember is standing still, eyes wide, clutching Isaac to her chest, wishing she had brought at least one bomb to address this situation.

She took a deep breath, let it out, and silently cursed Silver for taking so damn long.

Gary had told her to not say anything if she couldn't say something nice, so in order to be quiet Em was *literally* biting her tongue.

Finally, Silver and the crew came out from the other room.

Silver put her hand directly on Em's puff – Ugh! Rude!- used it to turn and walk her away from the rebreather enforcer.

The rebreather enforcer had gotten very far inside Em's personal bubble, and in fact had bent over into Em's face to her eye level and put a hand on each of her arms while she was monologuing, making Em feel very trapped.

As Silver navigated Em away from the enforcer, she mildly said, "No Touchy" to the enforcer as Silver guided Em away.

The rebreather enforcer stood upright, brushing herself off from having stood too close to Silver and crew, she crossed her eyebrows, and returned to her desk, angry.

She continued staring at Silver and the crew as they gathered around the rebreather enforcer's desk to retrieve their reward.

Feeling they didn't deserve any of it having endangered a poor innocent child, she typed a message to the Captains desk confirming the payment amount, silently wishing they were lying so she wouldn't have to pay them at all.

Her frown deepened as he confirmed it, paid the party, and they left.

Em kept shivering for the rest of the day, feeling the intense weight of the rebreather enforcer's eyes when she was monologuing at her.

As they stand in front of the enforcers office getting ready to go their separate ways, Des speaks up, “Gary and I have decided we’ve… uh… we’ve decided that we’re going to take the Standard Deal.” Gary is smiling at Dez, and she is smiling at the floor, then she looks up at Gary as she touches his arm, they look at each other and smile. “We want to start a family.”

The other half of the party all speak at once:

“I’m so happy for you!” says Silver.

“Congratulations!” Says Buddy.

“What… are you talking about?” Asks Ember.

The adults smile sadly, and Silver says, “We’ll talk about this tonight, okay, Em?”

“You and Tiny are very close, though, she might let you guys come to see us off, even though that’s normally against the rules,” Dez says, smiling.

Em thinks for a second, “See you off..? Where are you going?” Em eyes them, suspicious.

Silver repeats, “We’ll talk more tonight. But, realistically, Tiny might explain all of this better than we can. Would you do me a favor and go ask Tiny if we can see them off?”

Em looks Dez up and down. “Oh-kayyy… I’ll go ask her about it then…”

They chuckle as Em gets on her board and takes off.

Tiny walks back through the portal to level 64, exhausted.

She had received an urgent prayer in the middle of the night about a complicated delivery.

Normally, she wouldn't attend in person, but this was different... and local...

The birth had been hard, but both the mother and the child had survived.

What would happen next, though... they would have to wait and see...

Just as Tiny's head hits her pillow, there is a long sequence of banging at her front door.

Sleep when I'm dead... I guess... she thinks, making her way to the front door.

Ember arrives at Tiny's, shivers again thinking about the rebreather enforcer, then immediately starts banging on her door with the palms of both of her hands, singing "Tiny, Tiny, Come to the door, Tiny, Tiny, open your store."

Tiny opens the top half of her door, looking curious, confused, and mildly frustrated. "Oh, good morning, kid. Sorry, I didn't hear your voice. I just heard a lot of noise and frankly I was heading this way to punch the noise until it was quiet again." She says, rubbing her forehead.

"Where is Dez going? And... I guess Gary, too. Where are they going?" Ember asks, ignoring how sleepy Tiny was.

Tiny takes a deep breath, runs a hand through her hair and down her face, slightly pulling at her lower lid before turning and heading back into her level.

Em noted she looked more tired than she originally thought. Better keep the shenanigans to a minimum.

Heading inside Tiny's level, Em trailed her hands across the many counters and trinkets lying across them.

She pays attention to the way they feel, feeling their different textures and surfaces, trying to chase away the weight of the eyes from her interrogator earlier.

Em stops in the middle of the room while Tiny continues walking to her prep bench.

"What is the 'Standing Deal'?" Em asks, quieter than normal.

Tiny stops walking, still rubbing her hair.

She turns to face Em, "Did you hear that from Gary and Dez, or from Silver?"

"Dez." She replies, not looking at Tiny.

She felt unreasonably small.

"Mmmhmmm." She nods slowly sipping from a cup she had taken off her bench.

“Okay. Let’s talk about it.” She takes a deep breath, looks up, and lets it out. “Yeesh, that’s a lot to talk about,” she says, chuckling.

Tiny nods to herself, “Okay, let's bullet point this so we don’t miss anything. We’ll talk about: The Deal, Zecoatl, formally known as Quetzalcoatl, Kalasutra, and Kariteimo.”

Ember cuts her off, “Wait, wait, wait, me first: We did a job that took up *twenty-five whole levels,* Gary found my water tarps! Then! Then! *He drank from them*. Fucking asshole. Not really, though, he’s pretty cool. So is Dez. I really like them.

“I DID collect water for two of the last three days, but I *did* miss a day. Sorry... But in going back on the second day, the buckets caught most of what I would’ve picked up anyway, so I’m not *actually* ***that*** far behind? If you *really* think about it. The bottles are at the shelter, though; there were too many to carry all over the place. I’ll bring ‘em by later. OH MY GOD! *TINY*! A **STATUE** TRIED TO *EAT ME!!*”

This catches Tiny's full attention, and she locks in as Em recalls the details of the event in full while Tiny listens thoughtfully.

“That... is quite intense. The void seems to be.... evolving.” Tiny says, stroking her colorful goatee as she thinks about it.

Em flops onto a soft chair, shimmies around in the oversized, fluffy, tiny-sized chair, and turns upside down before saying, “Okay, your turn.”

Tiny sat in a chair opposite her main chair, one that was smaller, softer, and meant more for an adolescent than her massive size.

As Tiny sat in the chair, she was thankful she had the thought to build this chair to support her weight.

She took a moment, thinking of how to start her story.

“Let’s rearrange our talking points. We should start with where we are, before we talk about why people are so desperate to leave here, shouldn’t we?

“Child, what is the name of this Tower?”

Em makes a face, “The Tower? Maybe… Jenga Tower? I’ve heard that before, a couple of times.”

“You’re close, so close that technically, you’re not wrong. In the current era, we just call it ‘The Tower’, and before that, as far back as when it was constructed, the people who were destined to live here called it ‘Jenga Tower’ because of how it was built in such a rushed, imbalanced, and hazardous manner.”

Tiny looks to Ember, finding her sitting upright, staring at the ground, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

Tiny notes that Ember really has no way to know this part of history.

“As the fog rolled in, thick black ropes began to bind the planet. All the statues and buildings, anything humans had created, became bound by these thick black ropes.”

“Void,” Em whispers.

“You’re close, child. The ropes came before the void, believe it or not. But the ropes were summoned by the creator of void.

“After all the structures were bound, the humans themselves became bound as they slept. They would wake in agony, feeling the chains settling on their skin and burn into their bones, leaving black patterns tattooed on them, the chains as thick as their sins.

“Children and infants were not spared, as this is a world of rebirth, and every soul carries with it some of the grievances from their past.”

Em looks at the lines on her

body, now broken in segments and turned to gold.

She began to wonder what sins she had committed.

As she sat, examining her chains, she began to wonder why hers had turned to gold, and why the skin on her limbs had shifted to blue/black with starlight colored freckles.

“Why am I…?” She asks, holding her arm while she is looking at Tiny.

Tiny holds up a single finger and taps it on Em’s forehead, saying, “Don’t worry, kiddo, we’re getting there. You asked a while ago why Isaac wouldn’t need a rebreather to be in the fog?”

Em nods.

“The ropes that bound the human race are the same reason that brought the fog. The fog is meant as a punishment for those who live in this world, it is meant to keep those in Kalasutra separate from those living in Samjiva while still existing on the same planet.

“Kalasutra and Samjiva are two identical, but distinctly different Hellscapes that exist to punish a specific set of sinners.

“Ages ago, the Human Race had gone down a particularly unforgivable path, needing them to be separated off and sorted out.

“Those who passed their trials were allowed to leave, sent out at random to live in other worlds.

“Those who did not pass were doomed to repeat the cycle of death and rebirth within the two hells of Kalasutra and Samjiva until they were deemed ready to move on.

“To live in the Tower is to live in Kalasutra; to live in the fog is to live in Samjiva.

“Isaac is different, though. He is from a family that is not subject to these rules. He is an animal. Animals are not bound by the same rules that

the humans were.

“The important thing to remember about this curse is that it affects those who are capable of sin. Animals are rarely able to commit sin, but when they do, they are bound by the same laws as mankind.

“That is the story of Kalasutra, Samjiva, the Tower, and your Trials.

“Now about your chains? Let’s talk about Kariteimo.

“Kariteimo was originally a human mother. Her love for her children became so extreme that she became a devil to protect them from evil in the world. She had ten children.”

“*Ten Children??”* Ember interjects, sitting upright in Tiny’s chair.

“Ten wonderful girls. Well, eleven now.” She says with a wink.

Em looks bewildered but says nothing.

“Her ten daughters were named: Lambā, Pralambā, Kūṭadanti, Puṣpa, Makuṭa, Keśīnī, Acalā, Mālā, Kuntī, and Sarva. Sarva was always getting into trouble.” Tiny said, shaking her head.

“People called her children the Raksasis. They were demons in their own right. They had powerful blue black skin, often speckled by the stars themselves, much like yours.

“They got their appearance and their powers from eating… a special diet. Much like you did.”

Ember gasps, “The tea!”

Tiny smiles, “Indeed, child. They can also perform spells, magical chants and incantations…” she says with a wry smile.

“After becoming a devil, Kariteimo became the Mother of all demons, taking care of all the children who had been turned into demons and raising all who needed a mother.

“But she did this by committing something the Buddha considered a cardinal sin. She kidnapped and killed other people’s children to ensure the survival of her own.

“The children were always adults, but had parents none the less.

“Some of the children even had children of their own.

“The Historical Buddha decided to intervene, to show her the error of her ways. To do this, he took her most mischievous child, Sarva,”

Em gasps and interrupts again, “He took *Sarva??”*

She continues, “And he hid her. Kariteimo searched high and low, flying across the land, desperate to find her lost child.

“One would think that Kariteimo would not miss one single child when she had nine others, but since she loved all her children equally, she did miss her child.

“Day and night, she searched tirelessly for her one missing child.

“She knew what she had been doing was wrong.

“Finally, she turned to the Buddha in despair, awakened to the pain and suffering she had caused countless other parents, and to their families.

“And she repents, embracing the Buddha's teachings. In her repentance, she is transformed from the Mother of all Demons into the Mother Goddess, Protector of all Children, and Guardian of Motherhood and Childbirth.

“She is then tasked with the management of the magic of the Pomegranate tree, which is the symbol of and key to fertility with its many seeds.

“This is why you changed when you drank the tea: it saved you from rebirth into Samjiva and instead broke you free into a different life. Changing your path forever.

“That is where we are, and

who we are. Any of my beautiful daughters can become Gods in their own right, should they choose to embrace the teachings of the Buddha.

“Now, what is Dez’s trial? Motherhood. Who is her judge? Me.

“She didn’t resist when Kali decided to interfere with the cycles of rebirth between Samjiva and Kalasutra, the Fog and the Tower.

“He stopped the cycle in the Tower, as he was instructed.

“The numbers on the Tower dwindled significantly, and his power over that small number of people grew exponentially.

“Dez is ready to face the trial of motherhood again. To do this, she and Gary will sign a contract to turn over their souls, they eat the fruit of the pomegranate tree to allow them to begin this trial. Together, they will step through the portal to begin their new lives.

“From there, their fate is in their hands. The portal will take them where it sees fit, and we have no say in any of it. It will all come down to reshuffling their karmic lives back into the grand universe.”

Em shifts uncomfortably, sitting upright in the chair. “But I want to be able to *see* them again…”

Tiny sighs, “I know, Daughter. But that’s part of the deal. Once they’re gone, they could go *anywhere*. Once they’re gone, the only way we can keep them safe is to either nullify the threat here on Ma or to continue to hide them.

“Fate is a funny thing; there’s always a small chance it could bring your paths together again, but you should never rely on something as fickle as fate.”

Em frowns, looking like she’s going to cry, and Tiny crosses the room to comfort her. She picks Em up and sits her on

her lap before continuing.

“When the Fog first descended and people began disappearing out of here, it was because they were dying and being reborn elsewhere because they didn’t deserve to be reborn here.

“However, enough time passed that only the bad remained. Leaving these two hells became nearly impossible. Samsara became weakened.” Tiny said, shaking her head.

“Samsara?” Ember asked.

“The cycle of rebirth.

“Before the children died, you needed to endure enough of your punishment to repent, then you were released from the cycle into a new life to be able to try again.

“Since the children died, and the rebirth up here stopped, now you must commit a great act of either purity or kindness to be able to break free of the cycle and be reborn.

“Otherwise, taking the deal to leave the planet is the only other way to escape the cycle.

“Should I allow them.

“In days of old, Zecoatl was Quetzalcoatl, an immortal God of knowledge.

“He was often known as the Feathered Serpent, and he hated being reduced to such a small aspect of his characteristics.

“After all, he was the God of knowledge, learning, art, merchants; he had power over the wind and the stars, and he often thinks himself to be of a status much higher than his brother, Xolotl, the psychopomp.”

Ember giggles at the name, and Isaac looks up from their blanket nest tucked in a corner to see his girl smiling.

He thumps his tail in response before yawning and lying back down.

Tiny smiles at her giggle.

“Don’t let Xolotl catch you giggling at him, child, it means something different, now, but it translates directly to ‘Guide of Souls’.

“Often, Xolotl will guide spirits here to Ma, but in the end, it is his job to guide them where they need to go.

“When a soul is being reborn, it is his job to guide it to its next destination.” Tiny says, with a shrug.

“Zecoatl, though, always wanted more. Immortality leaves many with a certain… hunger.” She stares off into space, her face hardening. “If you have all the time in the world, you are able to have all of the ambition in the world, and some inevitably fool themselves into believing they *deserve* to receive the success of their ambitions, regardless of what they have actually achieved so far.

“When the Fog first settled on Ma, Zecoatl followed close behind.

“He wasn’t banished to Ma, quite the opposite. I believe he came here to work on something, to refine his new creation, void.”

Em cuddles into Tiny and whispers, “Are *you* immortal, *too?”*

Tiny freezes; she didn’t intend to answer that question so soon.

She looks down at the fragile child in her lap and hugs her close before answering, “They tell me I am, but truth be told, I’ve never tested it. Wanna try?” She jokes and makes a chopping gesture against her neck with the blade of her hand, leaning away from Em for her to see.

“No *no nooonoono.* No. No No. We don’t need to test that.” Em whines and cuddles in again.

“But it is important that the portal through which Dez and Gary will be leaving be opened as little as possible.

“While Zecoatl has the means to leave in other ways,

those ways are complicated and involve otherworldly politics.

“If he can spread void through the portal, even a drop at a time, he can start infecting other worlds, gaining power without so much as whispering his presence before his arrival, effectively leaving them defenseless.”

“I brought Timmy here with me when I decided to swing by this little planet and see what Kali was doing with all the children.

“I had heard whispers saying he was getting tired of taking care of the children, so I decided to swing by and make sure he was still… behaving appropriately.

“I had also heard of a mother who took on the immortal demon Kali head-to-head with her new child at her side, which piqued my interest.” Tiny said, winking at Ember.

“Kali got put back in his place, and to piss off Zecoatl, I decided to set up shop here, becoming a merchant.” Tiny says, chuckling.

“And it worked well. Skit showed up day one, hour one, sniffing around, trying to play ‘random citizen number 2.’” She snorts. “Fucking dumbass.

“Then I decided to make this merchant gig permanent, out of spite. And along you come, picking up all my slack and making my life easier than I ever expected it to be. I never really did thank you for that, did I?” She squeezes the kiddo. “Now I didn’t have to work magic to make ends meet; I had a real explanation.”

Tiny sighs happily, “But Timmy, I had worked with him before, and I knew he liked to help people.

“He especially liked to help people who were down on their luck. He used to use his magical trumpet to persuade people, did you know that? I offered him a job working for

me, and he took it.

“Timmy is in charge of my off-world tasks, which is a huge responsibility,” Tiny says, nodding.

Em looks at Tiny with wide eyes.

“I know, right?” she says, laughing, “The portal was a gift from Hermes, the messenger God. We have a rapport where we toss each other a trinket now and again.

“Hermes has made gathering messengers to work for me incredibly easy.

“I have two who roam around gathering information for me. I do greatly appreciate him; he always seems to know what’s coming.” Tiny says, thinking about Hermes.

Someone knocks on Tiny’s merchant door.

“Okay, kid, enough lore. I have to open the shop now. Go grab those water bottles you owe me, chop chop.” She says, setting Ember down in her chair. She stands up and heads to the door.

Dez and Gary were at their house, packing. They had one goal: to pack their whole lives into one small bag each.

For Dez, this was harder than you would think. She didn't know what personal care products she would find where they were going, and she was familiar with what she already had.

Seeing her struggle, Gary, who only needed half of his bag, offered some of his space to her for her things.

Once they were packed, they swung by the Trio's shelter and dropped off the rest of Dez's hair care products, leaving them packed neatly in boxes just inside their doorway.

Then they made their way to Tiny's, to drop off anything that could be reused by other people, as well as to restock on the personal care products Dez wanted to take with her but were halfway out of or more. No sense in taking empty bottles with you.

They then donated the rest of their credits to Tiny, to put back into the community however she saw fit before leaving for the day to say goodbye to Gary's family.

Dez and Gary swing by Tiny's level as some of the first customers.

Next Em returns with the water bottles and bangs on the water window a million times until Tiny checks on her.

Ember then announces loudly and excitedly that she now mysteriously has a million hair care products!

She isn't sure how to use all of them, but there was a note saying that Silver knew how!

Tiny was very excited and happy for her. They agreed to go over everything later, and then Tiny went back to tending to the remaining people in the Tower.

Silver swings by, insisting to pay Tiny for the loaner board now that she has some extra credits.

Ember shows back up with a monkey, and Tiny processes it.

Em is obviously freaked out after hunting the monkey, but safe and recovering.

Isaac has blood on his mouth.

Good Boy.

Tiny gives her a hug and tells her to swing by later and tell her all about the hunt with the monkey; she wants to hear all about it.

She also compliments the new hairdo Em is sporting and uses some wet washcloths to clean the blood off Isaac's maw and gives him a treat.

Tiny disregards their deal and gives Em all the meat to fresh roast, as it is their first hunt in a while. She also throws in some fresh wood to roast with, and some extra wood just in case.

Tiny also threw in some strawberry tea leaves, seeing how excited Em was for a hot meal, and as Em was doing her happy dance, she tossed two bundles of strawberries into her cart, knowing she would find them when she

got back to their shelter.

As Tiny closes up shop, she takes the water bottles Em had brought her, and the extra credits Dez, Gary, and Silver had given her, and begins taping the credits to the bottom of the bottles of water to be sold. Slowly, she makes her way through the entire inventory of water bottles and makes sure each bottle has roughly the same amount of credits taped to the bottom of it.

Humans need water to survive; it was criminal that they needed to find a way to pay for it.

Chapter 12

As Ember leaves Tiny's place, thinking about the fact that she used to have TEN WHOLE KIDS.

Well, eleven now?

She'd never understood Tiny.

That lady was *Crazzyy*.

Which, obviously, meant she was perfect Mom material, as being crazy was a requirement to be a mom.

Now she just had to hurry back to her main Mom before she got in trouble for staying out too late.

That lady was equally crazy, and a bit scarier...

Then again, if one parent killed her, would she just respawn here again?

From one parent to the other..?

The thought of dying only to be brought back here was... awful.

She boosted her board to go faster to get away from that thought.

Arriving back at their shelter, she finds Silver and Buddy cuddled up with their mattresses pushed together.

Em gives them a very stinky side eye and continues into the room, loudly announcing, "Don't worry about telling me, *Tiny* already **told me.**"

She gives them another side eye, grabs the first bucket of water bottles, and fills her cart around Isaac and shoves some more into her mini-duffel. When packing the cart, she notices he's getting big.

It doesn't feel like that long since they found him; she would have to work out the math on that later.

Silver makes eye contact with her as she is about to leave, clears her throat with a loud "AHEM", and rolls her eyes dramatically to the ceiling, then over and down to look at a new bin in the middle of the floor that had been inconveniencing Em this whole time.

Silver begins nodding her head to the side, towards the box, repeatedly.

Upon further inspection, it was hair care products! Many had little notes taped on them that were instructions, and in the bin, there was a large, unfolded note that read “Silver knows how to do more hair now, check with her when you’re ready to explore past your Picture-Perfect Puff – Love, Dez and Gary.”

Em screamed and ran to Silver, showed her the note, and asked what other styles she knew.

Silver pulled out the notebook from a bin Silver had decorated that now said, ‘Hair Care’.

The notebook was labeled “Dez Bible”.

Dez had made a point to fill with instructions on all sorts of different styles for them, and they spent time going over all the different options.

Silver and Em agree on changing her hair into finger coils when she finishes with the bottles, and Em takes off.

She heads back to Tiny’s and chucks the water bottles in through the open window near the back.

She repeated the process two more times until all the bottles in the two bins she had collected were deposited at Tiny’s.

On the last load, Ember bangs on the open window until Tiny shows up and Em tells her about the hair care products.

When she arrives back at the shelter again, Em heads into the vine room to wash her hair.

While she’s back there, she decides to do an ‘Everything’ bath, which takes long enough that when she comes back out, Silver has time to set up a little workstation for Em, specifically for dressing up.

Silver had set up the

workstation on the counter that divided Ember's workbench from the main living area.

This counter generally was a staging area for bits and bobbles Em had collected for her projects.

The bits and bobbles had now been moved into clear plastic drawers mounted against the wall at eye level and higher by her workbench, officially giving each size screw, drill bit, and gadget its own place, instead of being strewn across the counter.

In the middle of the now clean counter, wrapped with a ribbon, was a medium-sized mirror and a rechargeable light.

Em entered the room slowly, her hands clutched to her chest.

The first feeling was anxiety that her 'pending' bench was empty.

Then, as she continued to inspect, she took in the changes.

She slowly covered her mouth with her hands when she saw the mirror, then immediately ran over and hugged it.

"Dez beat me to it, but there was definitely a mirror in the works for you for your birthday," Silver says with a smile, as she comes up behind Em, beginning to play with her freshly washed, conditioned, and combed hair.

Together, they use the 'Dez Bible' to put finger coils in Em's hair.

After they're all in, the longest ones reach her cheekbones. Em can't stop bouncing her head back and forth, and Buddy has officially re-nicknamed her 'itty-bitty-bobble head'.

Silver puts her hand in her pocket and looks at Em. "I got you something else, too." She says with a smile and pulls out three long tubes.

“Tiny made a comment about how she was surprised you weren’t into makeup yet… which led to a conversation where she told me she had a small bit of makeup for sale that she restocked on rare occasions…”

Silver hands Em a tube of mascara, a tube of twist-up silver eyeliner, and a tube of twist-up gold eyeliner.

“*Obviously,* the gold will go great with your… tattoos? Is that what we’re calling them?” She looks to Buddy, then to Ember and shrugs, “But I thought the silver and gold would go well together; they complement each other.” She says, smiling, as she brushes Em’s hair out of her face.

Em rushes to Silver and hugs her tight enough that she might actually be trying to break some ribs.

Then, Em rushes to the mirror and, for the first time, puts on makeup.

When she finishes applying her makeup, she looks at herself in the mirror, from one side to the other. She smiles, makes an angry face, and then seems to get an idea.

She puts gold eyeliner on her cheeks like war paint and announces, “I’m going hunting! Be back later~” quickly loads up her cart, and leaves.

Buddy asks Silver, “Did you get anything to take the makeup *off,* by chance?”

Siler smiles, “I found makeup remover in Dez’s box, that’s why I thought to ask Tiny.” She shrugs, looks at Buddy, and smiles. “She’s getting so big.”

She holds her hands together, clutched to her chest as she sighs.

Em and Isaac hurry straight into the fog, diving well below level 20, pausing only for Em to slips on her rebreather moments before diving into the fog.

Finally, *she* could go into *their* territory again.

Isaac is still in the cart, and they slowly lap the outside walkway of each level before proceeding down into the next level.

Below level sixteen is where the foliage starts to take over.

The east side of level 10 had a lot of trees growing alongside it, many of which had branches growing directly into the level.

In these branches, she saw movement.

Em slowed to a stop, stepped off her board, loaded a bolt into her crossbow, then got Isaac out of his cart.

She began creeping closer to the branches, slowly reaching down, and she grabbed a piece of rubble and threw it into the branches.

There was a shriek followed by rustling.

The creature fled to the far side of the level.

She rushed back to her board, scooping Isaac as she ran, plopping him into the cart as she kicked the power switch to her board and in the same kick she used her heel to kick back the kickstand as the engines booted to life.

Quickly, they pursued the movement.

Zipping in and out, she weaves around the outer hallway of the level, quickly reaching the end of the east side.

They speed around the corner onto the south side.

From ahead of them, she hears something from one of the rooms.

They quickly park the board and cart, beginning to walk.

As they approached the

room, Ember gripped the crossbow two-handed, bolt facing the floor, as she slowly stepped into each room to scan for the creature before proceeding to the next one.

She made sure to be cautious as she cleared each room one by one.

Midway down the level, she stepped into the room and saw a twitch of movement above her.

Ember looked up, beginning to raise the crossbow.

The monkey was hiding above the entryway, hanging onto the broken metal between the crumbling concrete in the ceiling.

They made eye contact, it screamed, and dropped onto her.

She screamed in return and continued pulling the crossbow up towards the monkey.

She quicky realized it would not cover the gap it needed to in time.

Thinking fast, Ember decides to continue to raise it with her right hand and move her left hand to the emergency bowie knife attached to the stock of the crossbow.

The knife was attached so the handle was facing Ember when she was holding the crossbow; that way, she could grab the handle and pull the knife to her chest if she needed to defend herself quickly.

The bowie knife would have to travel a much shorter distance and it was a much lighter piece of equipment so it should move faster.

This all crosses her mind as she *thumps* the bowie knife to her chest, blade out handle secured against her sternum.

She hoped the knife would be enough to defend her.

As the back of her head hit the concrete ground, she felt intense fear begin to swallow her.

There was a snarl as she hit the ground, a flash of black and brown, then suddenly, Ember was getting showered with hot liquid.

Em lay on the ground, somewhat in shock, before realizing the monkey never touched her.

But... she still heard growling.

She stumbled as she got up, her legs were struggling to respond and noticed her hands were shaking.

Looking towards the growling, she saw her puppy, Isaac, standing rigid between her and a now dead monkey, hair on end, blood dripping from his maw.

The monkey was the same size as Em, and the only wound on it was on its throat, which had been ripped open.

Em threw her knife down and immediately searched Isaac for any wounds that might have been inflicted on him, before hugging him tightly, sobbing into his fur until she caught her breath, still panicked.

Still shaking, she loads the monkey into the cart and carries Isaac in her arms as they fly to Tiny's to have her process the meat.

She gives her the monkey to process, and Tiny lets her into the level while she processes the meat.

Tiny begins processing the meat while Em tends to the counter, selling bottles of water, cured and dehydrated meat, and other general goods while she and Tiny chat.

Em is visibly freaked out, but their routine helped her calm down. Tiny took Isaac when they first arrived at her level and cleaned him up.

Seeing her baby boy back to normal, instead of covered with monkey blood, helped, too.

She smiled when Tiny gave Isaac a treat.

The hug Tiny gave her when

she put Isaac back in her cart helped more, so did Tiny telling her to come back and tell her more about how hunting had gone.

She sounded so casual. She scoffs; little did Tiny know how useful her Bowie knives would be.

Tiny mentioning her hairdo is what brings her fully back into a feeling of normalcy.

They talk about her new mirror, her light, which Tiny knows a surprising amount about, her new makeup, and all the new ways she will be able to style her hair now.

Styling hair seems to be the one thing Tiny *doesn't* know about. Huh. Weird.

Tiny told her not to worry about the days she had missed hunting because of the job and that the deal would start over when 'Everything went back to normal'.

How did Tiny know things weren't 'normal' right now?

How psychic *was* she?

Tiny gave her all the meat after declaring it safe to eat, suggested roasting it and smoking the leftovers, and threw in some firewood, *real* wood, to go with it.

Em did a happy dance and hugged Tiny at the thought of having a hot meal tonight.

Seeing Em's mood return to normal, Tiny decides to throw in some tea leaves to go with the hot meal.

She promised they weren't special tea leaves this time.

Anyone could drink them.

These were just going to make normal, plain, boring, strawberry tea.

Back at the shelter, Em unloads the haul, and while she's unloading the packages containing the meat, she finds two whole bundles of strawberries!

She immediately tears one open and begins snacking.

Showing everyone her haul,

Buddy offers to take over the job of roasting and smoking the meat while Silver and Ember have a ‘girls' night.’

Silver, Em, and Isaac settle in the living area to show off everything Isaac’s learned so far.

Isaac successfully shows off: Sit, Lie Down, Stay, Left and Right, and Roll Over.

Silver had the idea to have Silver stand on one side, and Em on the other, and call out Left, or Right, then, when he looked at them, to reward him with a treat.

After he started responding to them, they switched up who was saying Left and Right, to get him to understand they were rewarding him for getting the word correct instead of simply responding.

After Isaac had burnt out his mental energy, Ember looked over at Buddy, who was meditating near the fire at the door. “How come you never meditate with him?” She asks, curiously.

Silver looks surprised, “Oh, I… I guess I never thought to. I didn’t really think much about it, and any time I see him meditating, he looks so peaceful, I figure if I join, I’ll just be interrupting him. Plus, you know, I don’t really know how.” She says with a shrug.

Em shakes her head, “I don’t think it’s like that. He’s pretty open about how to meditate, and he likes having you around.

“Are you sure you aren’t just worried that he’s already thinking what you’re scared he’ll be thinking?

“Like you’re putting your fears in his mouth before he has a chance to talk? That thing you and I fight about sometimes?”

Silver closes her eyes, looks at the ceiling, taps her foot, puts her fists on her hips, and finally groans. “I hate you.” She sighs, “No. I don’t hate you.” She gives Em the stinky side eye, “I just hate it when you call me out, and you’re

right."

Em giggles, "You should go talk to him. It would probably make him happy."

Silver nods, "When you're right… you're right…" She says as she walks over to Buddy and sits down.

He opens his eyes and smiles as she sits next to him.

Ember and Isaac cuddle up in the corner, pull out the Pavlov book, and settle in for some reading while dinner cooks.

That night, they feasted.

As Ember fell asleep, she made sure to tell Isaac, "I love you, Good Boy, thank you for today," She said with a kiss on his head. "Stay with me fur-ever, Good Boy."

Buddy woke with the sun.

This time, Silver was lying with her head on his shoulder, their legs tangled together, and her hand around his waist.

He kissed her on the forehead to wake her up and was greeted with happy mumbling this time.

Progress, he thought as he chuckled.

After breakfast, the trio heads to Tiny's to meet with Dez and Gary to see them off.

Arriving at Tiny's, she answered the door quickly.

They went to the middle of the level, into a small hallway separating the living area and the kitchen area.

In Tiny's level, there was a large room near the entryway, then behind that the level was split in half down the middle.

One side was for private living, the other half was for guests, when they visited.

The hallway that divided the level had a door on each side.

Behind each door was a stairway.

One went up, the other down.

They went down.

As they went down one level, they found Dez and Gary, curled up on a large, soft couch, surrounded by luxurious blankets and pillows.

When the duo saw the trio come down the stairway, they lit up.

Getting off the couch, Dez and Gary immediately fawned over Ember's new hair.

When they finished their hellos, they started their goodbyes.

Silver was intent on making sure they were confident about their decision, Ember was full of anxiety about what-ifs, and Buddy was surprisingly quiet.

As Dez, Silver, and Em bubbled over their questions with a mixture of anxiety and excitement, Gary and Buddy began their own conversation, which began with an extended period of silence.

Buddy spoke first, "I get it, though."

Gary laughed, deep and happy, "Yeah? Good, because I'm starting to question things."

Buddy tilts his head and looks at Gary, "Getting cold feet?"

Gary blows air out through his cheeks. "I mean... It sucks here. No doubt. But we make it alright. And my whole family is here. My great uncle Adam is still around and kicking. I'm kind of named in his honor... it was a joke, at first. He went on a trip and my parents thought he died, then he came back and... here I am." He chuckles softly. "They quickly changed my first name from 'Adam' to Rodina, which translates to family. So it works out. I still prefer Gary."

He looks at Dez. "When she first heard my name was Rodina she said 'Damn. That's just as dumb as naming a kid 'Gary', who looks at a kid and hates them *that much?'* " He laughs and

shakes his head.

“My uncle… He built a place for our family out and away from the Captain’s bullshit. We’ve lived with them before. Especially after we first met.” He continues looking at Dez.

He frowns, “But we can’t have a family here. And… While I *want* a family, she *needs* a family. You know? She’s a natural-born mom; to keep her from having kids… it would kill her.”

Buddy nods. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re doing the right thing.”

Gary nods and looks at the ground. “Thanks, man. I didn’t realize how badly I needed to hear that.” He claps Buddy on the shoulder. “You’re a good dude, Buddy.”

As Gary claps Buddy on the shoulder, Dez looks at Gary and smiles warmly.

Looking across the room, they see Tiny talking to three new faces.

One is a man in a trench coat. The man appears to be of medium height and stature. He is wearing a fedora and has his hands jammed into his pockets.

The second man was tall and had light tan skin, high cheekbones, and warm, chocolate brown, almond-shaped eyes.

He was wearing a green outfit that had larger sleeves than the group was used to seeing, and he was smiling at them broadly.

There was something magnetic about him, something safe, something that made you want to tell him all your secrets.

The third person was confusing to look at.

He was shorter than the rest, wearing an ambiguous red and white puffy jacket with a red and white baseball hat, but his features were confusing.

If you glanced at him and looked away, you would think

you knew what you had just seen.

However, glancing back and away again, you would have just seen someone else, wearing the same outfit.

But what began to give Ember a headache was when she stopped and stared at him.

She noticed his features began to swirl, constantly changing from one person's image to another.

Then he seemed to notice her looking at him, and they made eye contact.

Immediately upon making eye contact, everything about him became blurred out, almost to the point where he blended in with the wall behind him.

Ember began to get a splitting headache.

She looked down, putting both hands on her head.

Within seconds, it faded.

What the hell...

Tiny walks her group over to them, and as they approach, the blurry man stops shifting between his kaleidoscope of character images, picks one, and holds onto it for the duration of their conversation.

"Everyone, this is Mujun," she gestures at the green man, who smiles and gives a friendly wave. "Pegasus," she motions at the man in red and white, who nods. "And Timmy." The man in the fedora and trench coat smiles and takes his hands out of his pockets. He seems to be warm towards Ember.

"Mujun and Pegasus arrived last night to show Dez and Gary how the portal works," Tiny explains. "I also wanted to get an update on the state of affairs, elsewhere. Timmy goes wherever I need him."

She nods to the group, "We'll only need a few more minutes before we begin," and they step aside and begin talking in quiet voices again.

Dez turns to the group, “Oh, Silver, it was *beautiful*!! When they arrived, Tiny chanted the Green Tara Sutra, which protected the whole area.

“Tara *herself* appeared and blessed the area, then the portal opened, and it looked like heaven on the other side!!

“We didn’t see where they came from, and Tiny said that where we go will be random, but when the portal closed, it was white and shimmering, and *it was so beautiful!* I can’t wait,” she turns to Gary,

“I’m so excited to start my next chapter with you! To start *our* next chapter, to start *our* family!” Dez says as she hugs Gary under his arm, and he hugs her back and kisses the top of her head.

“I’m excited too, baby,” He mumbles, smiling into her hair.

Tiny comes back and asks if everyone is ready, and they begin.

They approach the large empty stone ‘u’ that is elevated on a platform in the middle of the room, Dez, Gary, and Tiny going to the podium directly in front of it, while the rest of the group hangs back at an area marked on the floor by a white painted circle around the structure.

Tiny snaps, and a contract appears, hanging in the air in front of them, a pen hanging in the air next to it.

She then asked if they would like the contract explained to them, and they declined the explanation and signed the contract.

Next, Tiny takes out a pomegranate fruit and splits it in half. She hands each Gary and Dez half.

She instructs that before they step into the portal, they must eat at least 51% or more of the pomegranate fruit that has been handed to them, or they will not be able to bear children.

Before the couple begins to eat, Tiny holds her hand over the pomegranate and asks if they would like an explanation of the importance of the fruit.

They decline.

Tiny removes her hand from above the fruit, and they begin to eat.

While they eat, Tiny gestures to Mujun, Timmy, and Pegasus, who sit cross-legged, and begin to chant the Green Tara Sutra.

They take a few breaths with their eyes closed and begin a few "Ommmm's" to find their rhythm as a group.

Buddy whipped his head from side to side in excitement.

He wanted to join, but the sutra had already begun; he wasn't sure if he remembered what Tiny had taught him.

His doubts got cut off mid-thought.

Once their voices had become one, they began to chant the mantra.

"Om Tare Tuttare Ture Soha"

Chanting in a clear, slow, rhythmic tone, the group counted the number of times they chanted by passing a string with knots through their fingers.

After chanting 50 times, the room began to take on a green glow.

Buddy was sitting and meditating, feeling the energy pass through him as they summoned the Green Tara with their sutra.

As the chanting continued, they passed 100 repetitions, and finally, passing 108 repetitions, the Green Tara appeared, forming a veil between them and the world around them, sealing them off from anything that could try to come in uninvited.

After passing 140 repetitions, the Green Tara had dismissed herself, and the area remained blessed.

The chanting slowed to a stop, and Tiny stood in front of the portal, ready to open it.

She closed her eyes, looked at the empty space where the portal would go, clapped her hands together above her head, brought them down in front of her together, and as she pulled them apart, she ripped open the fabric of time and space.

The portal was a jagged rip in front of them, slightly larger than human-sized, made of nothing but starry black.

Tiny said, without turning around, “10 seconds to closing.”

Dez and Gary turned to the trio and gave them each one more hug before walking up to the portal.

At its entrance, they kissed one last time.

Stepping into the portal carrying their one bag each, ducking their heads and stepping up and into the crack to be able to fit, holding hands the entire way.

With the sound of a cracking whip (50. Whip – sound effect), the portal immediately turns a dark blood red, crumples together, and seals with fire where the edges touched.

Chapter 13

As the portal closes behind them, Em looks at Tiny, bewildered, and shouts, "*What the hell was that?*"

Tiny ignores her and walks away from the portal.

"That looked like hell! Where are they going?? You need to bring them back!! HOW IS A NEW *RANDOM* HELL BETTER???" Em shouts.

Tiny walks away and heads for the exit of the level. "That conversation ends here, and once we leave this level, you will not be allowed to ask any questions related to this event.

"So, that being said. Do you have any other questions that do not have to do with where they went?" Tiny asks, face serious.

Ember's hair stands on end, enraged, as she begins to shout.

Silver quickly wraps a hand around Ember's mouth and pulls her child back against her.

Her reality had shattered.

A *literal God* just ripped open space time in front of them, their friends left through it, and the portal bled and burned as it closed.

'What the Fuck' didnt come *close* to covering what she was feeling.

Ember looks up at Silver, feeling betrayed.

Silver's hand covering Ember's mouth is shaking.

As she looked up at her, Silver's face was pale, her lips were the same color as her face, and her eyes were wide and unblinking.

Was she in shock?

It dawned on Ember, she had already known about all of this, but Silver had closed her ears time and time again, focusing only on the *immediate* and *logical* threats that were presented.

Tears began to fall onto

Ember's forehead.

Was Silver... Was she *afraid* of Tiny...??

Em watches Silver begin to take deep breaths, fast at first, then slower and slower.

After roughly a dozen breaths, Silver had composed herself, as had Em, unknowingly following her example.

Silver lets go of Em's mouth and twists some of her hair coils, lightly kissing Em's forehead.

She strokes her face, then she asks, softly, "Did you have any other questions before we leave?" She asks, smiling softly.

Ember looks from Silver to Tiny and Buddy.

Their fear is palpable.

She then looks at the floor and thinks.

'Yeah, she's a God, but she's *my* God. She's Tiny. There's nothing for me to fear here.' Ember nods to herself.

Looking at Tiny, Ember raises her hand, "Yes. Will you please fill them in on everything you've told me? They didn't listen when I told them." She smiles and nudges Silver softly.

Tiny nods in acknowledgment, starting to smile.

"I'll tell you guys everything, but while I do, can I fix your guys hair as well? The contrast between you three is... notable." She says, laughing as she brushes Silver's knotted mess of bright red curls behind her shoulder.

Tiny and Em fetch some hair care products from where Dez and Gary were before they left, products left behind meant for Em, and begin to brush and trim Silver's knotted hair.

Ember conditioned Silver's hair, and applied curl

enhancer, then tried to finger coil Silver's large loose red orange curls.

It worked a little, but not really.

More than anything, it was a bonding moment for the two, as Ember momentarily took on a caregiver position to Silver.

One she hadn't had in a long time.

After that, Tiny cut Silver's rat's nest into a chin-length layered butterfly cut.

Tiny turns to Buddy to examine his hair, finding it a mess as well.

She holds up some buzzers and pulses the button twice. He looks at the buzzers and nods slowly, unsure what to expect.

Once they are informed and are sufficiently groomed, Tiny says she has one more thing they need to talk about, then they can leave.

"There is a new hire at the enforcers' office. Kani-Ko. She is another Demigod, an AI Demigod who has been hired to run the electronics for the enforcers.

"This was mostly a response to Ember breaking through the security in the enforcer's hovercar provided by Mars technology a few years back.

"Kali wanted something better, something impenetrable." She looks at Em, who cracks her knuckles.

"I'm up for a challenge." Em says, smiling.

"No, you're not. You're not about to go 1v1 with an artificial intelligence Demigod for control of a system. You're not *that* dumb." She scolds, giving Em a look.

Tiny turns and opens the door. As they open the door to leave, the Green Tara's Sutra lifts.

As they leave, Tiny explains they know more about the

process than anyone else, and the only reason they are allowed to know is because Silver stood up to enforcers and won, Tiny loves Em as her own child, and she still believes in Buddy.

She considered the information safe with them.

Tiny leads the group up the staircase into level 65.

Once they were all present, Tiny turns to Ember, claps, and shouts "Happy Early Birthday! What would you like for your birthday, my dear?"

Ember thinks for a second, "I want a new weapon, and a lip ring!" she announces, looking smug.

Silver perks up, **"Lip Ring?"**

Tiny makes a face, "You gonna keep it clean? You get one shot at this."

Silver whips her head to Tiny. *"You're going through with this?"*

Tiny looks at Silver, "She's 10, it's a lip ring, what's the big deal? You're less concerned about a 10-year-old wielding a new weapon than you are with her getting a piercing? Really?"

This deflates Silver. "Okay, yeah, solid point."

She looks at Ember. "What kind of weapon did you want?"

Ember smiles as her face darkens. "I want a Sodium Metal Spear."

Tiny puts one hand over her eyes and whispers "...*bitch*..."

While Silver and Buddy look at each other and ask, "Why?"

Tiny looks at the ceiling and sighs. "That's on you, kid, explain." She says, waving one hand in a circle.

Em giggles and claps her hands. "Happily. See, I've been thinking about this. Void is weak to salt and fire.

"So, I asked Tiny a while ago

about infusing *salt* into *metal*." Ember is looking down at her hands, her smile is wide, her palms are turned up, and her fingers are clenching and unclenching as she speaks.

Tiny shakes her head, and Em keeps giggling, "*Then,* Tiny told me that there was no need for that, because sodium, *salt,* could in fact ***be a metal!!"*** Ember is fully laughing now.

Buddy and Silver look at each other, and Buddy says, "Oh... Kay? What is so special about that...?"

Tiny cuts in, sounding tired, "Sodium metal ignites on contact with liquid."

Em is smiling far too wide, "Blood is a liquid. Void is a liquid."

Silver blows air out of her cheeks. "Kid, I love you, but damn, sometimes you scare me."

Tiny sighs, "I'll have it done soon. I'll let you know when to pick it up. Happy Birthday." And kisses the top of Em's hair. Then she flicks a hair coil, "Love the new 'do."

Tiny sees them off and shuts her front door behind them.

The trio heads back to their shelter and spends the rest of the day recovering from the massive shift in their world, playing family games, and spending quality time together.

The next morning, Ember was awake before Buddy.

She began poking each of her parents on the forehead, poking one, then the other, saying, "Guys, *guys, **guysss.**"* Ember says, crouched down as she is taking turns poking each of them in the forehead.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!!"

Buddy wakes up while Silver is still groaning.

Ember jumps up, arms up, legs planted, and shouts "I'M ***TEN*** BITCHES!!!" Em shouts before doing a small dance in a circle.

She then leans over their bed and announces, "Do you know what *that* means?" Smiling.

Silver rolls her eyes and mumbles, "Yeah, yeah, lip ring, whatever."

Ember scoffs, "It means *I* should be the Third Member of your Cleaning Crew!" She says with jazz hands. "Cappy *has* to allow it for at least a *little* while!!"

Silver and Buddy look up at her as though she had grown a new head.

Silver speaks first, while Buddy only makes a face. "Oh, hell naw."

Em pouts and asks, "Why *not?* I'm in double digits, I'm a good hunter, I can make bombs, and my new weapon will be amazing for keeping me safe! Think about it! I've *got* this!!"

Silver rolls onto her back and covers her eyes with her elbow. "What about Isaac?" She asks, gesturing with her free hand.

Ember pulls out a spray

bottle and mists him with water.

Silver lifts her arm and looks at them. “What… was that?”

Salt water! Now he’s good too! *And* he can alert us to where they are! Come on, think about it, and for *once,* ***stop*** thinking about me as a frail little child. Think about *everything I’ve done*, *I’ve got* this, *we’ve* got this!!” Ember begs.

Buddy nods and responds, "Okay. You got my vote.”

Hearing this, Silver jumps up on one elbow and looks at him in disbelief, "*What?*"

Buddy looks at her calmly, "You didn't stop thinking about her as a 10-year-old, did you?"

“Even so! Cappy- I mean- the Captain is *clear* that groups of 3 can’t be too well connected!” Silver argues.

Buddy shrugs, “So we count as a group of 3, and we add in another group of 3 so we can still split the wages equally, then, when we get more comfortable, we rotate. Two people cleaning and 1 person tending the house, taking turns.”

Silver stares at him in shock, “That’s… an amazing plan.” She blinks, then smiles, “Actually, okay.” She nods, looking at Em. “Count me in.”

The three of them arrive at the enforcer's office to register Em as the official third member of their cleaning crew.

As they enter, the rebreather enforcer startles behind her desk, clearly uncomfortable with them being there without an appointment.

Silver approaches her desk, “We need to meet with the Captain. We are here to update our list of crew members.”

Carol nodded stiffly before standing and ushering them to the Captain’s waiting room.

As she turns to leave, she places her hands on Em’s shoulders and begin to steer her back to the main waiting room.

Em immediately jerks away from the enforcer’s touch, raising her voice to shout, “Hands off!”

The rebreather enforcer startles, shocked the child would defy her, an obvious authority figure like that.

She sputters, trying to come up with what to say.

Em beats her to it, thumping her fist to her chest and announcing, “It’s *ME,* **bitch. I’m** the new crew member!”

She says this with her full chest, pulling her shoulders back and raising her chin as she makes the announcement.

This announcement takes the rebreather enforcer by surprise.

Her heart lurches, fire surges through her veins.

The seeds of resentment that had been sewn long ago fully blossom.

She seethes as she allows the child to wait with the adults.

The Captain comes out, raising his eyebrows at Em before bringing the three into his office.

Buddy stands at the back, and Silver steps forward, as usual.

Seeing Silver step forward, Em steps forward with her.

Buddy catches her elbow with a gentle hand, pulling her back against the wall and softly shaking his head.

The Captain watches with interest, before asking "What happened to Dez and Gary? Did you *scare* them off already?"

Em seethed.

She hated him already.

Silver speaks, staring behind him at the wall, "We weren't getting along so we decided to go our separate ways. Now that Ember is 10, she meet the age requirement to be our third; until she learns the ropes, of course."

The Captain's eyes wander up and down Ember before speaking, his mouth hidden behind his laced fingers, his elbows pressing hard on the desk.

'So… *this* is the **damned child…** after all these years…'

He clears his throat, "She will have to undergo testing to determine level and rank, if she meets your level she can clean with you."

Silver speaks sharply, "And when she doesn't, I will be allowed to *mentor* her. As stipulated in the rulebook."

Kst. That *damned* book.

Why had he ever committed any of his rules to writing, anyway?

He frowns before speaking, his voice thick with resentment. "…fine. She has four days to complete the assessments. All 8 of them."

As the crew leaves, the new enforcer pulls Silver aside, speaking in an angry, hushed whisper “If you don’t get *that* ***child*** off your cleaning crew immediately, ***today,*** you three will have some serious problems on your hands..

Silver yanks her arm out of the enforcer's hand, leans in close and whispers “*Fucking* ***try it. Bitch.***”

Outside of the doors to the enforcers office, Em announces “I’m off!”

Buddy and Silver look at each other, then back to Em.

Buddy asks, “Um…?”

Em laughs, and points at her bottom lip before running to the edge of the level and jumping off.

Silver’s blood ran cold when she saw Em fly that way, especially so low in the Tower.

Buddy rubs small circles on her upper back, trying to comfort her as his panic rises to match hers.

Arriving at Tiny's, she flies straight in through the window.

Before she hops off her board, intent on scaring Tiny, Tiny hollers from the other room, "Got everything all set up in here for your lip ring!"

Em deflates slightly because she wasn't able to scare her, then immediately reinflates at the idea of her lip ring.

Tiny pierces Em's lower lip, right in the middle.

She gives her a thin gold hoop to wear while it heals.

Tiny then gives her saline solution and a mouthwash, teaching her how to keep it clean until it heals.

Specifically she was **NOT** to fiddle with it or it wouldn't heal right.

Tiny gives Em some more painkillers and sends the crew home with some special food to enjoy the day.

For lunch, they eat roasted carrots with salt, strawberries, broccoli, and avocado.

For dinner, they ate potatoes Buddy had stuffed in the coals of the fire, along with some soft, yellow-white patties Tiny gave them to eat with the potatoes.

She said it was called ‘butter’.

It was heavenly.

There were two kinds of potatoes, orange and white.

Ember loved the orange ones and hoarded them for herself, although the rest of the trip gave theirs up willingly.

They talked openly about Dez and Gary, the conversation circling from them to Demigods, to the Tower, and back to Gary and Dez.

At the end of the night, the three meditate together.

Silver makes it about two minutes, Em makes it a whole six minutes, and Buddy is ready to stop when the rest of the group wants to stop.

He was happy they were taking an interest in what he is interested in.

Waking with the sun, Buddy finds Em already in front of her mirror by her workbench, fiddling with her lip.

Her appearance seems freshly made, looking like she has been up for a while.

“Tiny said not to mess with that, kiddo,” Buddy says, sleepily.

“Yeah, but I think it's healed,” Em says, making a face in the mirror.

Buddy sits up, moving Silver to the side. He gets out of bed and moves to the workbench to inspect her lip.

Upon inspection, it looks healed.

This leaves Buddy thoroughly confused.

What... was it supposed to look like, after all?

He shrugs, “Probably best to go see Tiny.”

“Agreed,” said Ember, already halfway out the door, her cart packed.

Isaac barked a goodbye as they left.

Em arrives at Tiny's level and opts for the window entry again. Em slides in through the open window, hops off her board and yells, "I'm *here!*" when she lands.

Tiny yells from the other room, "Your lip healed already, didn't it?"

"Holy shit, how did you know?" Em asks, running into the other room to find her.

Em finds Tiny butchering some meat in the front room. "I forgot about the tea when I pierced you, no big deal." She wipes her hands on her rag, grabs Em's face, who is immediately grossed out and begins struggling, saying "ew- ew- ew- EW- *you didn't* ***wash***" while Tiny inspects her lip.

As soon as Tiny lets her go, Em rushes to grab a bottle of fresh water with some soap and washes her face.

"Well, since it's healed..." Tiny holds up the band she had picked out the night before.

Ember squeels and dances around the room before giving Tiny a tight hug.

"If you ever wanted more... I want to show you something..." Tiny says, walking towards a work bench next to the bottle storage room.

"There are... options?" Em immediately becomes enamored.

Tiny gestures to the other side of the room. Together they walk over to a wall of drawers attached to the wall on that side of the room, and with her elbow, Tiny points to a drawer, having Em open it.

Inside, Em finds it full of jewelry.

As Em screams in delight and begins to dig through everything.

While she looks, Tiny packed a portion of her gator into her cart.

Em found herself debating

between the thick rectangular gold band and what turned out to be an earring.

“The earring is cute, but won’t work for your lip. We can pierce your ears if you want, but for right now, if that’s what you’re choosing between, I vote on the band.” Tiny comments.

Em holds the band extended fully above her head; elbow locked. “It is decided.” She declares. She turns to Tiny, “How do I put it in?”

Tiny shows her how to change the lip rings, how to clean her old lip ring, and put it in a small plastic baggie for her to keep.

Em clasps the baggie in both of her hands and hugs Tiny. “Thank you *so much!!*” she says before getting up and dancing around.

As she sits back down, she sees a medium-sized card propped against the wall. Curious, she reaches out and grabs it to inspect it further.

Tiny looks back at the meat she had been butchering, wondering if ten was still too young to start butchering.

Realistically? Probably not… especially in this world.

“Oh!” Em exclaims, immediately enthralled with the card. “*Hmmm…”*

Tiny explains, “That the card is a map of the face, laying out the normal places piercings can go. Were you interested in more?”

Together, they came up with a piercing plan that Tiny was certain was going to change.

Because she was sure it was going to change, Tiny set a limit on earlobes today, and from then on, no more than one piercing per day.

Tiny wanted Em to settle into a clear image of what she wanted herself to look like before they started making changes.

Em begins spouting off about how she wants 3 piercings from the lobe to the upper lobe of each ear, two hoops in the helix, a snug, and one in the tragus of each ear. [4]

All gold.

Ember then decides she wants to pierce her nose.

Tiny rolls her eyes at this.

She decides she wants a septum ring and a stud in each nostril, with a chain attached to the studs that went across the bridge of the nose.

Tiny begrudgingly agrees but sticks to her 'One Piercing Per Day' rule.

She wanted to encourage Em to look however she wants to look.

As they begin to look at the placement for the first lobe piercings, Em is still looking at the piercing map of the face and starts to muse about an eyebrow ring.

Tiny takes the face map card away from her, frisbees it across the room, and says, "Girl, your face is about to look like Swiss cheese if you keep this up."

Ember looks confused. "What's a Swiss Cheese?"

Tiny sighs, "You'll eat it one day, I'm sure."

They then pierce Em's earlobes with small gold studs, and Em runs around the level screaming in delight like a little kid.

'Well... she *is* just a kid... after all' Tiny thinks as she watches Em run around.

Em spends the rest of the day at Tiny's, spending time with her because she missed her, having not seen her as much as normal in the last few days.

[4] Image available on page 379 in lore and references. IT IS IN THE SPOILER WARNING SECTION.

She was also hoping her spear was ready already, but sadly, it wasn't.

That day, she asks Tiny to teach her how to butcher meat, and she does!

Normally, Tiny would tell Em that it wasn't something she had to worry about, since she was 'too young'.

But that day, Em learned how to butcher multiple different kinds of animals and how to pack the meat for storage.

After butchering the meat, when Em asked what the orange potatoes were called, Tiny told her to grab her board and cart.

Tiny takes Em to her gardens, which start on level 71 and go to level 99, skipping 87 and 89 to not interfere with Em's water collection.

When Tiny showed Em how much space she had blocked off and broken open to the sunlight for growing, she was amazed.

"How do you keep void away?" Em asks, in awe.

Tiny shows Em to a small upright cylinder in the corner of the garden area. "This is called a prayer wheel. Those carvings are for the Green Tara Sutra, uncommon for prayer wheels, but effective against Zecoatl.

I run through each level and give each wheel a spin once per day, and that seems to be enough, so far, to keep the void away from the entire level."

"Although, if you find yourself in the area and feel like giving it a spin, that would be appreciated." She says, looking at Em and smiling.

Em immediately steps forward to the wheel and spins it, falling in love with the sound of the wood clacking as it turns.

Going through each garden, Tiny teaches Em what each plant is, how to harvest it, how to gather the seeds, and how to re-plant it.

In the gardens, Em has one restriction: You can only take what fits in your cart. This makes Em very slow to select her fruits and veggies, and she mildly regrets bringing Isaac, especially when he licked her haul.

Em was not allowed to taste or take fruit from the pomegranate tree.

Back at Tiny's, she had Ember get a new notebook and, before diving into the fruits and veggies, Tiny had Em write down everything she had learned about processing meat from that morning.

Next, Tiny showed Em how to process each of the fruits and vegetables she had gathered and told her various ways to cook each one.

She sent Em home with more firewood, as well as a pot to boil water in so they could try something called a 'soup' with some raw meat, potatoes, onions, a small plant called garlic, and carrots.

As Em heads back to their shelter, her head swims with everything she learned.

With Em leaving first thing in the morning, Silver and Buddy had the whole day to themselves.

Around midday, they decided to get out of bed and start their day.

As Silver got up and got a bottle of water for her and one for Buddy, the conversation turned to Dez and Gary.

They spent roughly an hour speculating where they had gone, if they would ever see them again, and if they were in a better place or not.

Tiny seemed certain that no matter where they went, it would be better than where they were now.

One thing was clear: Dez was gonna be a Mama soon enough.

They also agreed they shouldn't talk about Dez and Gary in front of Em, unless Em were to bring them up first.

As they talk, Silver is searching through bucket after bucket and bin after bin for something she traded for well over two years ago.

Finally, she shouts 'Aha!' and turns around with a tattoo gun and some ink.

Buddy laughs, "You really do keep everything, you hoarder. What were you thinking?"

They take turns tattooing each other, giving each other small, meaningful tattoos that Em *probably* won't notice.

God forbid she wants one for herself.

As Silver is bent over Buddy's forearm, tattooing him, he brushes her hair out of her face for the millionth time. "I love your hair." He says, brushing it behind her ear, and lifting her chin to kiss her as she looks up from her work.

They break from Buddy's tattoo so he can braid her hair, which keeps falling in front of her face, braiding it in

front of each ear.

Looking in Em's mirror, Silver laughs, "*EEWWW,* I *hate* it, don't let anybody see me like this." She says, laughing.

"I love you however you look." He says as he tickles the braid against her nose.

"Okay, anybody but you then," She says, returning to the tattoo.

She rushes to finish the tattoo, as the sun is low in the sky and Em is due back any time.

They bandage their 'scratches' and try to come up with a cover story as Em comes in and sees Silver picking up the tattoo gun as she prepares to hide it.

"Tattoos? I want-

AAActually, not yet, Tiny would kill me if I got a tattoo before I finished getting my piercings." She said, thoughtfully.

Silver made a 'wtf' gesture with both hands as she processed that. "I- Plural? You know what, whatever, kid, welcome home." She says, chuckling.

"Home? We're calling this 'home' now? Officially? You were so against that word for so long. Are you sure?" She looks concerned, then she glares at Buddy, "Did *you* do this?"

"Fuck if I know," He says, laughing. "Whatcha got in your cart, hon?" He asks, seeing her cart overflowing with... something.

Ember smiles *widely,* turns to her cart, and gently takes out Isaac, who begins running around and yipping. Then, Ember starts item by item, grabbing fruits and vegetables and throwing them behind her without looking.

A confused Silver and Buddy are immediately bombarded by all sorts of fruits and vegetables, and when Em finishes unloading her cart, she turns and proudly displays her notebook, and

yells, “TaDa! I learned how to ‘Gardening’! And today Tiny taught me how to process meat! Plus, this tells us how to prepare and cook them! And it has a recipe for ‘Soup’! Tiny wanted us to cook it tonight; she gave us everything we needed for it.

“She also gave us extra firewood, and a… a ‘put?’ No… a ‘pot’?” She looks at Buddy and Silver for confirmation on the word.

They look at each other and shrug, “Sounds tasty!” Says Silver.

Together, they cook ‘Soup’ for dinner and brew strawberry tea.

Em starts talking about how she wishes she could show her new ‘Gardening’ skills to Dez and Gary.

For the rest of the night, they reminisce about Dez and Gary as a family, missing their former teammates, and wondering where they are now.

After dinner, they all meditate together, with Buddy helping remind Silver to be patient with herself when she showed frustration over not being perfect right away.

The next morning, Buddy wakes with the sun.

He decides to start the day by meditating.

After some time, he began to hear the rest of his family moving around their 'home'.

He felt safe.

Continuing to meditate, he heard Silver flop into a sitting position next to him, and he smiled.

"At it pretty early, eh?" She says.

Peeking at her from the corner of his eye, he finds her smiling.

He sighs and smiles. "It just felt right. Something just felt… serene about this morning." He looks out of the doorway at the early morning sky and smiles.

"It does. I wonder what is next for us." She muses. "Em says that I need to ask you something about the four truths?"

Ember sits up in her bed after hearing her name.

Her head is on a swivel from left to right as it scans the room.

Buddy and Silver remained quiet, they had seen her sleepwalk like this before and knew if they stayed quiet she would go back to bed.

After a moment of silence, she goes limp, flopping backwards back onto the bed and begins lightly snoring.

Whispering, Buddy gives Silver a rundown on the four noble truths.

After he's done talking, Silver nods. "You're not wrong, though. 'Suffering' is a *bit* dramatic, a way to put it, even if it does describe the 'out of alignment' pretty well… when you think about it…" She says, making a face.

Buddy nods as Em lets out a loud yawn and rolls out of her bed and onto the floor, grumbling.

Buddy nods, "There's also something called the 'path

that leads to the end of suffering', the eight-fold path, which focuses on the 'right way' to complete that 'end to suffering'.

For example, you wouldn't throw out perfectly good food that you want to eat, because you're hungry, right?"

Silver nods as Em rolls her way over to the two of them and lifts her head onto Silver's lap.

Silver absentmindedly begins to stroke Em's bonnet softly.

"So, we agree, there is a right way to address different kinds of suffering." He says nodding. "The eight-fold path is for helping people figure out the *right* way to end the suffering that they are trying to end.

"The way it is laid out is:

"Right view, Right intention, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right concentration.

"Having the morally 'right' stance on each of these eight points will make it much easier to make the best outcome for all involved."

Em mumbles. "What do those mean?"

Buddy smiles, "Maybe you should meditate on it."

Em narrows her eyes at him before looking back at Silver and asking, "Hey Mom, Since 6 of the 8 tests the enforcers make you take are about reading and writing... let's... not start them... today...?"

Em lay in Silver's lap, looking up at her hopefully.

Silver chuckles and brushes Em's cheek. "You got it kiddo. Just us, today."

Em squeals and cuddles into Silver's lap in a hug before jumping up and grabbing even *more* food from their haul yesterday and beginning 'Cooking' again.

The rest of the day, they spent practicing cutting, cooking, and eating fruits and vegetables they had never seen or tasted before.

Ember makes a trip over to Tiny's with each dish they cook to have her try it.

Isaac doesn't like fruits *or* vegetables, no matter how many times Ember keeps trying to feed him.

With every failed fruit or veggie attempt, Buddy counters with a meat option, trying to see which meat option is his favorite, while Ember insists that if she needs to eat fruits and vegetables, so does he, since they're both kids.

By the end of the day, for the first time possibly ever, they all go to bed with their bellies full of hot food and flavored drinks.

At the end of the night, Buddy cleaned up, while Silver and Ember started a side project that Buddy pointed out was too big to both start and finish that night.

Ember had insisted that since she was going to start cleaning with them, she wanted the contents of her mini-duffel to match Silver's duffel.

After Buddy finished cleaning up, he lit the fire in the doorway before joining them on the floor as Silver was still unending her endless duffel.

Buddy sat back and watched her explain, item by item, the uses and reasons for each item.

Together, they noticed Ember starting to yawn.

Silver kissing the side of Ember's head, smiling and saying, "Let's finish in the morning. Time for bed."

Em nods and yawns before getting up and starting to get ready for bed.

Silver got up off the floor and looked at the wide scattering of tools on the floor. She nodded. Buddy was right. This was way too much to do

I none night.

As Em drifted off, she realized that now she could work with Silver and Buddy, that meant she would always know that they were safe.

Silver decided to leave everything out, scattered on the floor. They could finish in the morning, no big deal.

As they lie down for the night, Ember lifts the blankets so that Isaac can cuddle under them with her.

He snuggles up to her and she kisses the top of his head, whispering, “I love you, Isaac. Stay, Good Boy. Stay with me fur-ever.”

Em drifts off to sleep, her fingers twisted in his fur, Isaac sighing deeply as he felt her drift off, safe and sound.

Chapter 14

In the middle of the night, Em begins to starfish in the bed, and Isaac is too warm under the blanket, so he gets out of the bed and moves to his normal spot on the concrete next to the bed.

Isaac rests his head on the mattress next to his girl and falls back asleep.

Shortly after, Isaac hears a hissing noise, smells smoke as the fire at the doorway is extinguished, hears a metal tube hitting the floor in their home, and smells an overwhelming amount of chemicals.

Then, everything goes black.

Carol, still wearing her rebreather, slowly enters their shelter.

She adjusts her rebreather, smelling smoke, and wonders if she needs to change her filter again.

Nudging the dog with her foot, she then moves forward and nudges the man with the same foot, making sure the knockout gas worked and that they were all asleep.

After confirming they were asleep and should effectively be asleep for at least the next eight hours, well past sunrise, she grabs the dog by its scruff, only to find it wearing a stupid vest with an admittedly handy handle on it.

She picks up the limp dog by the handle and struts out of the dirty shelter, stopping to lift her rebreather just enough to spit on the dead fire as she leaves.

Through the rest of the night, void begins to creep towards their level, unchecked.

As Carol leaves the shelter with the dog flopping annoyingly against her knees, she heads out to where she left her hoverboard, by the statue at the corner of the level.

Stepping onto her board, she finds it is unable to carry the weight of both her and the dog.

Annoyed, she hangs the dog on the lantern the statue is holding out in front of it, using the handle on the dog's stupid vest to hang it.

She then leaves to go back to the office and get another board to clip to hers so that she can carry the stupid dog back to the office with her.

She makes the trip down quickly. As she arrives, she grabs a second board and clips it to hers. Then, as she checks the clock, she finds

it's nearing 4 am.

Damn.

She was tired.

And *hungry*.

She decides it would be best to take some time making some breakfast, as the rest of the morning would likely be spent either finding a way to hide the stupid mutt and keeping it quiet, maybe she could drug it? Maybe find some other way to knock it out for a long time?

Or just kill it.

As soon as her pet was dead, Silver and that stupid kid would realize that Silver was the worst possible choice for a mother, and they would come to their senses.

Then it would only be a matter of time before they came to the office, begging them to take in the fucking brat.

However, if she brought it *back,* ***alive****…?*

Ugh.

She would have to argue with Captain about why the damn smelly thing was in their office *at all*.

Oh my god. What if it started pissing and shitting on everything? It *was* a wild beast, after all.

She would lose the argument with the Captain, anyway, and it would get sent over the ledge.

Why was she going back for it again?

Ugh, Silver was **so** annoying.

Why couldn't she just get on her knees and *stay* there?

Anyone from the Tower was *lucky* to have them around at *all*.

This was all **her** fault.

Why did she create a situation where Carol **had** to respond like this?

After eating breakfast, she drank some coffee and

headed out with her clipped board back to the statue.

She begrudgingly looked for the dog who should still be hanging on the lantern, assuming it hasn't woken up, wiggled its way off the statue, and fallen yet.

She sincerely hoped to find nothing hanging on the statue when she got back. That would make life so much easier.

Heading back to the statue, she is frustrated to find the mutt still asleep, dangling by its vest off the lantern on the statue.

However, there was an opportunity.

Void had now begun to come out from around the level, and it was filling the ledge leading out to the statue.

The more void reached towards the dog, the more the ledge began to sag.

It could give way any moment.

Satisfied, Carol turned and cruised back to the office.

One way or another, her job here was done.

Isaac remained limp, hanging from the lantern, its soft, flickering light being the only thing keeping the void from reaching him.

Tiny stomped her foot inside the trio's shelter and shouted, ***"SILVER, BUDDY, GET THE FUCK UP. YOU HAVE SHIT TO DO!!!"***

The walls and ceiling shook with the intensity with which she yelled, the reverberations mysteriously missing Ember, leaving her undisturbed as she continued to sleep peacefully.

Silver and Buddy jolted awake, as Tiny continued speaking in a rushed manner, "Isaac is in danger, Carol, the rebreather enforcer took him, he's in danger, go, take your weapons, I'll wake the kid, she's drugged, you all were, I'll explain later, ***MOVE!"*** Tiny says, pushing her way into the shelter, seeming impossibly large for such a tiny space.

Hearing the word 'danger', Silver is up and running out of the shelter.

As she passed the large piles of things she and Ember had pulled out of their duffels the night before, she only slows momentarily to dip down and grab a salt bomb before sprinting out of the door.

In her panic, she didn't grab her board, which wasn't in her duffel and her sleepy mind couldn't remember where she had put it, nor did she grab her flamethrower, as it was near the back of the shelter and that would waste time.

The only thought in her head was 'fuck' as she sprints of the shelter on foot.

'Fuck Fuck Fuck Fuck Fuck Fuck Fuck

Fuck’

She thinks to herself as she runs into the pre-dawn light;

*Ember **needed** Isaac.*

*She **had** to find him.*

*She **HAD** to **SAVE** him.*

Behind her, Buddy runs to the back of the shelter and grabs his gear before following behind her, several long seconds later.

When Buddy got to the doorway of the shelter, he didn’t see Silver.

She must have gone to check the closest ledge with the statue.

He went the opposite way, intent on doing a lap around the building to check the other ledge and make sure he wasn’t hurt and vulnerable somewhere else.

Odds were Silver would be right with her instinct, but Buddy wanted to check all other avenues as backup before rejoining Silver.

Rounding the corner near the statue, Silver immediately finds the problem, a large mass of void all piling out onto the ledge of the level where the statue would be.

Seeing the pile of void, she immediately pulls the ripcord on Ember's bomb, throwing it directly in front of her.

It lands in the blob of void with a squish, exploding a moment later.

The explosion is loud, and sends void shooting in every direction, splattering Silver with drops of corrosive black ooze.

She exclaims and slows, swatting at it before hearing a sizzling, and looking up to find the noise.

The void had been blasted off the ledge, leaving only puddles on the hallway concrete on either side of the ledge.

Silver immediately sprints through the piles of void, jumping over them, landing on the other side, hoping to find Isaac.

As she lands on the ledge, she feels it sag and bounce.

Her stomach drops as the ledge bounces, and she freezes, taking in her situation.

The void had regrouped at the entrance to the ledge and slowly began creeping back onto it, towards Silver.

The added weight caused it to sag further; it could give way at any moment.

Silver looks around, frantic, and sees Isaac hanging from the lantern on the statue, his eyes blinking open.

When Isaac realizes the situation he is in, he immediately begins to start to struggle against his harness, demanding to be free of the cause of his dangling.

If he slipped out of the harness, he would fall 50 stories down into the fog, possibly sliding even further down the mountain once he landed.

Quickly, Silver rushes over and removes him from the lantern, cradling him in her arms.

Each step bounces the ledge.

She coos at him and tries to calm him down from the initial panic of waking up hanging over nothing, about to fall, as void is trying to consume you.

She tries bouncing him the way you would a baby, but as she does the ledge begins to bounce with her, causing her stomach to drop again.

As she is trying to calm him down, she hears the sirens of the enforcer's cars pulling up. They block off her path back to the Tower, conveniently blasting fire at the remaining void until all that remains are puddles of charcoal.

The enforcers car is hovering over the sagging ledge, closing the only exit from the statue back to the Tower.

The Captain's voice announces over the loudspeaker:

"Well, *well*, Silver. It would seem that you are in need of *rescue."*

"Not if you would get the FUCK out of my way!" Silver shouts, throwing her arm across her body as she spoke.

The metal began groaning and popping as it swayed and bounced.

Captain's voice returns "Tsk tsk, we're here to *help,* isn't that right, Carol?"

Carol's voice comes over the

intercom, “To Serve is our Duty, Captain.”

“Fuck your duty, fuck your bullshit, get the ***FUCK out of MY WAY!!”*** Silver screams at the enforcer hovercar.

Small poles with balls at the end of them protrude from the sides of the enforcers car.

The rods begin to spark with electricity as the Captain’s voice comes back on over the intercom again. “Don’t be *silly* now, Silver! We’re here to *help*. So, of course, any acts of violence, or any perceived acts of violence, will be met with authorized use of lethal force, as you know.” She could hear the smile in the Captain’s voice; he had been waiting for this.

Silver grit her teeth, holding Isaac close to her chest as he began to wiggle.

Ember and Tiny came running up to find the scene spiraling out of control.

Ember took in the situation, saw that the hovercar was blocking Silver from returning to safety, and began hurling her own insults and pointless profanities at the hovercar as she began running towards it.

Tiny caught up with her in two large steps and plucked her off the ground, holding the screaming and struggling child from interfering with the enforcers and becoming tangled up in this political mess.

Silver considered her options.

The enforcers weren't letting her return on foot, and the ledge extended a full 3 meters out into open air, extending straight out from the corner of the level.

At that angle, the jump from the statue to the ledge was 135 degrees, making the distance she would have to jump from where she was standing currently to where she had to land being just over 5 meters, 5.2 meters to be exact.

Silver was unaware of any of these calculations; all she knew was that the space between her and her daughter was long.

In Silver's panic, she both fully believed that she could make that jump and had no belief she could make that jump.

Ember, however, believed in her.

She had seen Silver bridge gaps of 10-12 meters across before during their games.

The back door of the enforcer's car pops open. "Get in. Standard rescue fees are 50 million credits. And, as you know, that debt can be worked off at the rate of 50 credits/day.

"But why don't I cut you a deal..? Since you've worked for us for a while now, it'll be... oh, let's say 75 million? Does that sound like a fair price for saving your life?"

Silver and Ember make eye contact across the gap.

She knew what she had to do.

If you choose to jump... Go to Jump.

If you choose to accept the debt... Go to Debt

All 3 books will **always** be available for **free** on the website, The Internet Archive, a free online library.

Go to **https://www.archive.org** and search for **The Worm in my Brain,** (in the search bar not the wayback machine search) or go directly to my author page on The Internet Archive:

https://archive.org/details/@_Selanon

Everybody in this book is a work of Fiction!

But here are some YouTubers I like!

Neuro-sama
@Neurosama · 786K subscribers · 388 videos
neuro-sama (neurosama) the ai vtuber ...more
twitch.tv/vedal987 and 5 more links
Subscribed

Adam Ondra
@AdamOndra · 615K subscribers · 292 videos
A Czech climber ...more
youtube.com/@AdamOndra/membership and 7 more links
Subscribed Join

bbno$
@bbnomoney · 3.9M subscribers · 592 videos
baby no money ...more
broke.ffm.to/bbno and 6 more links
Subscribed Visit Community

Mujin
@MujinOfficial · 599K subscribers · 174 videos
Videos about degeneracy for those afflicted by ADHD. ...more
twitch.tv/mujinofficial and 3 more links
Subscribed Join

MorePegasus
@moresus · 753K subscribers · 878 videos
MORE YAPPING ...more
instagram.com/pegasusx1yz
Subscribed Join

jacksepticeye
@jacksepticeye · 31M subscribers · 5.2K videos
I play videogames but I also make other content like Try not to laugh, reacting to tik
topofthemorningcoffee.com
Subscribed Join

EminemMusic
@eminem · 65.9M subscribers · 208 videos
Marshall Bruce Mathers III, better known by his stage name Eminem
eminem.com and 4 more links
Subscribed

Dr. Dre
@drdreyt · 7.89M subscribers · 34 videos
More about this channel ...more
missionaryalbum.com and 4 more links
Subscribed

50 Cent
@50Cent · 18.1M subscribers · 433 videos
50 Cent's Official Music Channel on YouTube. ...more
instagram.com/50cent and 2 more links
Subscribed

SnoopDoggTV
@snoopdogg · 11M subscribers · 1.7K videos
Official Snoop Dogg Channel ...more
snoopdogg.com and 4 more links
Subscribed

Zelenskyy President
@Zelenskyy_President · 1.36M subscribers · 2.8K videos
Zelenskyy's team on YouTube. Unofficial YouTube channel of t
tiktok.com/@ze__president and 2 more links
Subscribed

CORPSE
@corpse · 2.89M subscribers · 19 videos
=/ ...more
open.spotify.com/artist/7yntSJ6uojO3z6GFUVwhAW?si=2
Subscribed

ironmouse
@IronMouseParty · 1.42M subscribers · 1.2K videos
The official channel of that weird pink haired Puerto Ri
twitter.com/ironmouse and 5 more links
Subscribed Join

CDawgVA
@CDawgVA · 3.25M subscribers · 442 videos
This guy is hilarious, his acting is on point and he's jus
twitch.tv/cdawg and 7 more links
Subscribed

GrndpaGaming
@grndpagaming · 1.4M subscribers · 1.2K videos
Hello, Grndpagaming here, I served as a diver for 20 years
grndpagaming.gg
Subscribed Join

Gab Smolders
@GabSmolders · she/her · 1.26M subscribers · 4.4K videos
More about this channel ...more
twitch.tv/gabsmolders and 1 more link
Subscribed Join

CinnamonToastKen
@CinnamonToastKen · 4.82M subscribers · 4.3K videos
Hi, I'm CinnamonToastKen! Here you'll find hilarious react vi
youtube.com/channel/UCSZCvYJYv9DXt3bly7fnupA and 3 r
Subscribed Join Visit Community

Buffpro

@BuffproThe · 146K subscribers · 99 videos

I am the one and only Buffpro! Been doing this YouTube thing for 5 years

Subscribed

penguinz0

@penguinz0 · 17.3M subscribers · 6.6K videos

Twitter: https://twitter.com/MoistCr1TiKaL ...more

twitch.tv/moistcr1tikal and 3 more links

Subscribed

Critical Role

@criticalrole · 2.65M subscribers · 1.6K videos

What started in 2012 as a roleplaying game between friends has evolved into a multiple

beacon.tv and 5 more links

Subscribed Join

The Other Channel

@ThisIsTheOtherChannel · 724K subscribers · 108 videos

Welcome to Charlie's other channel where he and his frien

Subscribed

Overly Sarcastic Productions

@OverlySarcasticProductions · 2.5M subscribers · 845 videos

Sarcastic, yet informative, summaries of classic and not-so-classic literatur

Subscribed

Hank Green

@hankschannel · 2.67M subscribers · 1K videos

More about this channel ...more

werehere.beehiiv.com/subscribe and 2 more links

Subscribed

JaidenAnimations

@jaidenanimations · 14.8M subscribers · 222 videos

hi it's jaiden and bird ...more

jaidenanimations.com and 3 more links

Subscribed Join

vlogbrothers

@vlogbrothers · 4.04M subscribers · 2.4K videos

Raising nerdy to the power of awesome. ...more

werehere.beehiiv.com/subscribe and 4 more links

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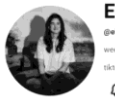


Elyse Myers

@elyse_myers · 1.09M subscribers · 417 videos

weekly videos uploaded every friday ✌ ...more

tiktok.com/@elysemyers and 2 more links

Subscribed Join

John Green

@johnschannel1007 · 507K subscribers · 459 videos

More about this channel ...more

everythingistb.com and 2 more links

Subscribed Join

Judge Simpson TV

@JudgeSimpsonOfficial · 168K subscribers · 207 videos

Welcome to the Judge Simpson TV ...more

youtube.com/channel/UCTcHLCIL_SKZ9n4O1NHHeCQ

Subscribed

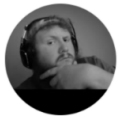
Steven He

@StevenHe · 13.7M subscribers · 814 videos

Chinese-Irish actor and Comedy Sketch Creator. ...more

instagram.com/thestevenhe and 4 more links

Subscribed Join



CaseOh

@caseoh_ · 9.09M subscribers · 1.9K videos

Streamer on Twitch - caseoh_ ...more

twitch.tv/caseoh_?sr=a and 4 more links

Subscribed Join

NameIsInUse

@nameisinuse8405 · 12.5K subscribers · 754 videos

Welcome to my D&D channel! I will be making and uploadin

Subscribed

Josh Johnson

@JoshJohnsonComedy · 2.08M subscribers · 859 videos

More about this channel ...more

instagram.com/joshjohnsoncomedy and 5 more links

Subscribed Join Visit Community

Cardi B

@cardib · 20.1M subscribers · 202 videos

The official YouTube channel of Cardi B. ...more

cardib.lnk.to/AITD and 10 more links

Subscribed

I tried.

I *genuinely* tried.

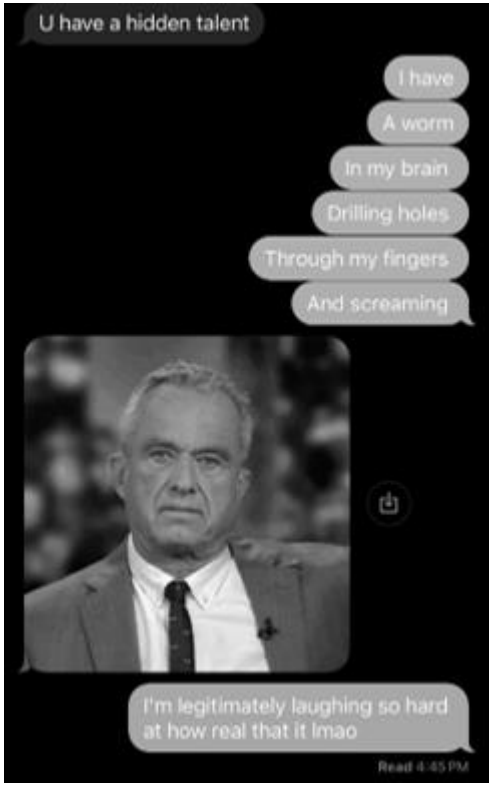
Very hard.

To make these all the same size and be listed in the same order in which they appear.

But, I screenshotted them differently, and with books two and three not being chronological… that just led to all sorts of chaos.

Fuck it, I tried lol.

This book series is titled “The Worm in My Brain” Because of these messages between my friend and I:



Lore

AKA

(Sort of) An Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is a list of sources that includes a summary and evaluation of each source.

However, in this section we will not be evaluating each reference in full, *because fuck that*.

Kariteimo / (Tiny BadBitch)

Tiny's appearance was strongly based on the minotaur Tavern Keep from Vox Machina, Season 1, Episode 1. An anime created based on a DnD YouTube Channel ran by voice actors, called Critical Role. I saw the character's style and fell in love, sadly, they do not re-appear in the series.

The legend of vox Machina-1x01 vox machin
Exit Full Screen or press ESC to exit
0:00 / 0:52
Scroll for details
CartoonAnimeScraper

(*The Legend of Vox Machina-1x01 Vox Machina gets Thrown out of a Tavern*)

訶梨帝母, Karitei, Kishibojin, Kishimojin, Kangimo

Sanskrit = हारिती Hārītī, Hariti; Chn. = Guǐzǐ mǔ shén; Korean = Gwija mo sin 귀자모신

Hindu Mother of Child-Eating Demons. She Repents and Converts to Buddhism.
Now a Buddhist Goddess of Easy Delivery, Giver of Children, & Guardian of Children.
Often shown with Pomegranate in Right Hand (a symbol of fertility due to its many seeds).

Zecoatl Family Tree:

Quetzalcoatl, (Aztec Mythology):

Quetzalcoatl (/ˌkɛtsəlkoʊˈætəl/)[3][pron 1] (Nahuatl: "Feathered Serpent") is a deity in Aztec culture and literature. Among the Aztecs, he was related to wind, Venus, Sun, merchants, arts, crafts, knowledge, and learning.

(Overly Sarcastic Productions, *Miscellaneous Myths: Huitzilopochtli*)

Quetzalcoatlus, (Dinosaur):

Quetzalcoatlus northropi, is widely believed to have been the largest flying creature that ever lived.

Paleontologists contend that *Q. northropi* stood about 5 meters (16 feet) tall and had a wingspan of up to 11 meters (36 feet).
(Stephen Eldridge, *Quetzalcoatlus*)

(https://ar.inspiredpencil.com/, *Dinosaur Identification Chart for Kids)*

Xolotl (Brother)

In Aztec mythology, **Xolotl** (Nahuatl pronunciation: [ˈʃolot͡ɬ]ⓘ) was a god of fire and lightning. He was commonly depicted as a **dog**-headed man and was a soul-guide for the dead.[2] He was also god of twins, monsters, death, misfortune, sickness, and deformities. The axolotl is named after him.

(Overly Sarcastic Productions, *Miscellaneous Myths: Huitzilopochtli* 2017)

Grandma, Granny Anny

(Overly Sarcastic Productions, *Miscellaneous Myths: Huitzilopochtli*)

Mother, Coatlicue (/kwɑːtˈliːkweɪ/**;** "skirt of snakes"), wife of Mixcōhuātl, also known as *Tēteoh īnnān* (pronounced [teːˈtéoʔˈíːnːaːn̥], "mother of the gods") is the Aztec goddess who gave birth to the moon, stars, and Huītzilōpōchtli, the god of the sun and war. The patron of women who die in childbirth, was another aspect of Cōātlīcue. (*Cōātlīcue* 2025)

Zecoatl's Mother, and only daughter of Coatlicue (400 sons, 1 daughter). Gets beheaded and becomes the moon shortly after giving birth to Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl. Got impregnated by a magic ball of feathers. (Overly Sarcastic Productions, *Miscellaneous Myths: Huitzilopochtli*)

Coyolxauhqi (Mom) is upset about her magical pregnancy, blames her mom (Granny Anny) and beheads her. Granny Anny grows 2 heads of large serpents to replace her human head.

(Overly Sarcastic Productions, *Miscellaneous Myths: Huitzilopochtli*)

The Void

(*Nocookie, Void*)

The Void was a large structure created from black pixels, located in the center of r/place. It acted as an antagonistic force to other organizations, consuming anything that came in its path.

The Void was revealed to be the attempts of uncanny Mr. Incredible in breaching the universe. He successfully manifested as a dark god, before being met by the community in an attempt to stop its apocalypse.

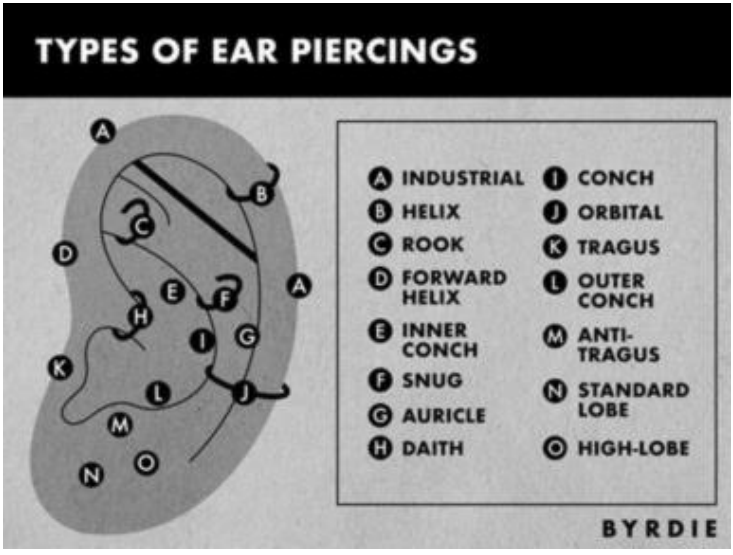
With a limited space on the canvas, The Void came into existence to destroy bad/poor quality art so the space could be replaced with better art.

Buddhism

Buddhism Is Distinctly Different From Other Religions

Buddhism is non-theistic. The Buddha taught that believing in gods was not useful for those seeking to realize enlightenment.

Instead of teaching doctrines to be memorized and believed, the Buddha taught how to realize truth for yourself. The focus of Buddhism is on practice rather than belief.



(Lawrenson, 2024)

Kalasutra / Samjiva

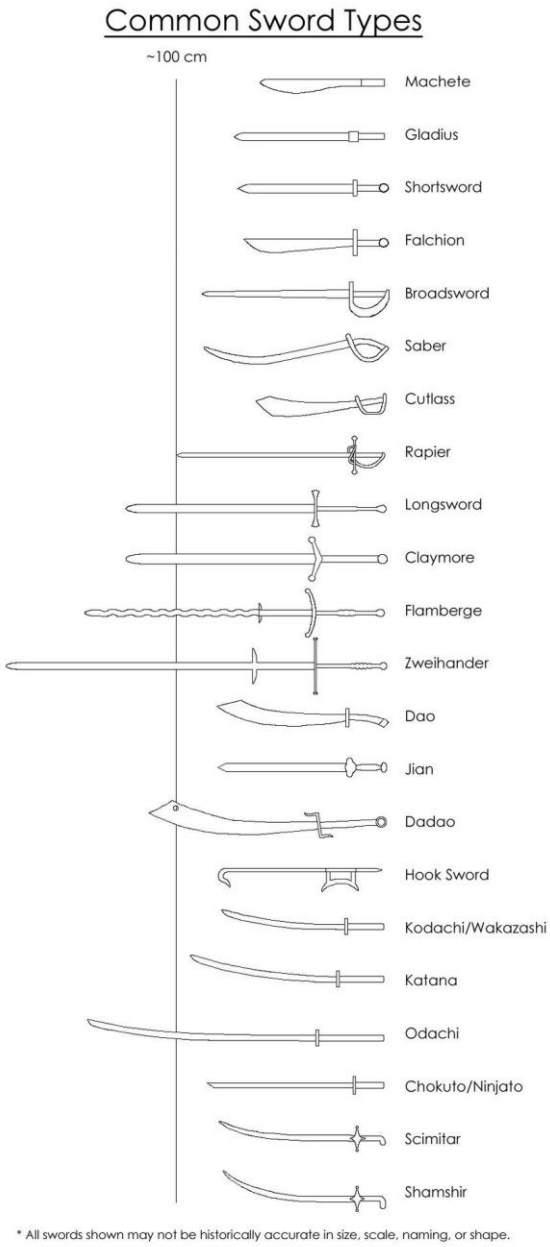
"Geography" of the Hell Realm

The ice hells are above the hot hells. The ice hells are described as frozen, desolate plains or mountains where people must dwell naked. The ice hells are:

- Arbuda (hell of freezing while skin blisters)
- Nirarbuda (hell of freezing while the blisters break open)
- Atata (hell of shivering)
- Hahava (hell of shivering and moaning)
- Huhuva (hell of chattering teeth, plus moaning)
- Utpala (hell where one's skin turns as blue as a blue lotus)
- Padma (the lotus hell where one's skin cracks)
- Mahapadma (the great lotus hell where one becomes so frozen the body falls apart)

The hot hells include the place where one is cooked in cauldrons or ovens and trapped in white-hot metal houses where demons pierce one with hot metal stakes. People are cut apart with burning saws and crushed by huge hot metal hammers. And as soon as someone is thoroughly cooked, burnt, dismembered or crushed, he or she comes back to life and goes through it all again. Common names for the eight hot hells are:

- Samjiva (hell of reviving or repeating attacks)
- Kalasutra (hell of black lines or wires; used as guides for the saws)
- Samghata (hell of being crushed by big hot things)
- Raurava (hell of screaming while running around on burning ground)
- Maharaurava (hell of great screaming while being eaten by animals)
- Tapana (hell of scorching heat, while being pierced by spears)
- Pratapana (hell of fiercely scorching heat while being pierced by tridents)
- Avici (hell without interruption while being roasted in ovens)


Common Sword Types
~100 cm
Machete
Gladius
Shortsword
Falchion
Broadsword
Saber
Cutlass
Rapier
Longsword
Claymore
Flamberge
Zweihander
Dao
Jian
Dadao
Hook Sword
Kodachi/Wakazashi
Katana
Odachi
Chokuto/Ninjato
Scimitar
Shamshir
* All swords shown may not be historically accurate in size, scale, naming, or shape.

(Litchi, 2015)

Spirit Lamp, a monster from DnD, 5e.

Medium undead, chaotic evil

About:

Spirit lamps are cursed creatures carrying lanterns that trap the souls of their victims and unleash those souls to ravage the living.

Descent Into Madness. A living creature that touches the lantern is cursed, unable to release it and unable to see except in the lantern's light

Baku Bokujin

"Baku are Japanese supernatural beings that are said to devour nightmares. They originate from the Chinese Mo. According to legend, they were created by the spare pieces that were left over when the gods finished creating all other animals." (*Baku (mythology)* 2025).

Bokujin is Japanese for Shepherd. (*How to say Shepherd in Japanese*).

Bai-Ülgen

Region/Culture: Turkic, Central and Eastern Europe (Russia, Alps)
Mythos: Turkic Mythology
Primary Type/Nature: Gods and Deities
Mythical Attributes: Ülgen symbolizes goodness, abundance, and is considered a creator deity closely associated with cosmic elements like the birch tree and the horse.
Role in Mythos: Ülgen is revered as a high deity who creates and sustains the universe, including the earth, heavens, and all living beings.
Relation to Humans: Ülgen is seen as a protector of humankind, particularly against evil forces represented by the god Erlik. Humans, especially shamans, perform sacrificial rites to communicate with him, seeking knowledge and protection. Only shamans with special astral abilities can ascend to his golden house in the heavens to receive divine guidance.

(*Bai-ülgen: Creator god of Turkic mythology and Cosmic Balance* 2025)

Bai-Ulgan

In the vast tapestry of Mongolian mythology, a benevolent figure reigns supreme: Bai-Ulgan (also known as Ülgen). He stands as a creator deity, shaping the world and imbuing it with life. His name combines “bay” (meaning “rich”) and “ülgen” (meaning “magnificent”). Often distinct from Tengri but occasionally identified with him, Bai-Ulgan plays a crucial role in shaping the cosmos and human existence.

(*Bai-Ulgan :the creator god - mythlok*)

Buddy's Past:

Buddy is skilled at swordsmanship and making poison.

He is a known murderer who used to hunt enforcers for sport out of spite and vengeance. However, after meeting Tiny and converting to Buddhism, he took a vow of non-violence, with reasonable accommodations given the lifestyle of those in the Tower. He met Tiny roughly 5 years before book 1.

The enforcers used him as their main scapegoat, especially after Tiny showed up. The enforcers ended up establishing that if someone (mainly enforcers) died of unknown or unclear circumstances, they logged it into Buddy's file to make their paperwork easier.

This lead to allowing enforcers free reign to do anything to any one, and simply report that Buddy had done it.

The poisons Buddy had created were two specific textures. One was thick and tacky, while the other was thin and viscous. The two poisons played off of each other, causing symptoms that increased effectiveness when used together.

Buddy's sword changed frequently as it was just whatever piece of metal he could find around the Tower that he would bend over and over to break off from the Tower, then trap a cloth around one end so he had better grip.

Because the swords often weren't strong, he used poison to increase effectiveness.

Buddy and Silver's Past:

Buddy and Silver knew of each other before Tiny made her way to the Tower, but they did not often work together as during that time Buddy was less interested in surviving and more interested in taking as many enforcers down as he could before dying.

While Silver and Em were establishing their relationship and taking on the citizens of the Tower, Buddy was repenting and converting to Buddhism.

Isaac:

If Isaac is Xolotl, why didn't he do anything during the end scene of book 1?

Knockout gas.

Why don’t mutants live in the Tower?

Mutants were actually supposed to be a big plot point in this series, and were going to have their own choose your own adventure path.

May still do this, unsure.

… *mayyy* be thinking I would name it Ma, Reborn. Life in the fog…

Mayyy already have a plot brewing in my head that I can’t quite… shake…

TLDR:

The citizens of the Tower were made to believe that seeing mutants meant you were marked for death, so if any were found they were killed on sight.

Down in the fog, though, mutant civilization was a globe spanning civilization, similar but not identical to modern day Earth. They still have much of Earth’s technologies and periodically rise up against Zecoatl, trying to reclaim their planet.

Babies are born as humans, and on their first breath of fog, they immediately and painfully mutate.

Many do not survive their first breath.

What did Ember ask the Knowledge Eater?

Jump:

Ember wanted to remember everything from book 2 for her next go-round.

The knowledge eater agreed, but under the condition that she see what would happen if she went in armed with the knowledge of the future.

Then she could make her choice.

She saw the outcome and saw that having knowledge of the events of book 2 lead to her making poor decisions during book 3.

The decisions she made were poor because she assumed that what had happened before would happen again, exactly as she remembered them.

This led to her making assumptions and bold decisions that she wouldn't have otherwise made if she approached the situations as though they were new each time.

Because the situations *were* new.

She saw the mistakes she would make, the people who would be hurt, and decided to hand over the knowledge of her prior experiences, allowing herself to be born again, as a blank slate.

This experience taught her that approaching situations without an expected outcome is the best way to get the best results.

While Ember forgot what specifically the Knowledge Eater had shown her, they left behind in her the lessons she had learned, sending her forward able to be wiser, and more open to experiences than she was before.

Debt:

Ember recognizes she's been there before, wants to know why it all feels familiar.

Learns about what happened in Jump.

She asks where she is going to be reborn, confirms again that they will find each other in the next life.

Asks to learn about what will happen in the next life.

Knowledge eater knows but refuses to tell her.

Knowledge eater asks if she wants to see what life would be like if she remembers everything from the past, in her next life.

Ember thinks about it, denies.

She knows she's going somewhere different this time. She wants to have a clean slate.

She doesn't know how she knows, she can just feel it.

That's why her main concern was not being able to find Silver again in the next life.

And... Buddy too, I guess.

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https://www.citationmachine.net/

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Some Special Thank yous

Some Special Thank yous

To the **Readers**, my Daughter is the entire reason behind Isaac being Xolotl, and him living.

Isaac was supposed to die at the end of book 1 as a triggering event to launch the rest of the story.

She put her *foot* down, and **demanded** that he live, bringing it up every time we talked as well as texting me repeatedly "Let Isaac Live".

To My Daughter.

First and foremost, Izzy.

Daughter.

Dot.

My precious Daughter.

Thank you for bearing with me during the time where all I could do was talk about the book.

Where it was hard to pull me away from writing so we could game.

Thank you for listening to me where I would annoyingly keep talking about it over and over, often struggling to talk about anything else.

Thank you for being patient beyond your years, allowing me extra time to transition from writing to gaming.

Thank you for giving me extra time to change gears from being lost in the hyper fixation, for giving me extra time to finish making my notes for where I was in the outline/research/scripting or (most annoying for you) the writing process.

Thank you, *thank you* for tolerating this time, and *thank you* for your significant contributions to the book.

With you helping me with key details such as the names, which myths to include, this character or that, the character weapons, and the plot twists and turns, you unlocked the rest of the book in my brain.

You were essential to the creation of the story.

My brain easily gets hung up on the small details, refusing to do anything else until they are settled but also refusing to be the one to make the decisions about the small things.

You being the one to make those decisions for me, the one to help guide the storyline, even with only having a basic framework for each decision being made, was instrumental.

Plus, knowing that I could bounce ideas about the fictional 10-year-old off you, my awesome 11-year-old, was instrumental to book 1.

I know you're mad about Ember.

You wanted her to be a direct 1:1 representation of you.

However, she is not you.

Ember may have been structured on you in the beginning, and there may be scenes that directly reflect you as a human.

But as the story changed, so did Ember.

And, Dot.

I am so very grateful you have lived a wildly different life than she did.

Thank you, Dot.

I love you more than you will ever know. <3

To my Therapist.

Thank you for not letting me kill myself.

Thank you for being the change that took away those issues.

You being you, I imagine you're asking 'what did I even do?'

When I started meeting with you, I saw the world as a violent, chaotic, mistrustful place that only wanted to hurt you.

There was no love, there was no kindness.

I didn't have a framework for what healthy looked like, I only had what had been drilled into me by people who were not healthy.

By sticking with me for so *damn* long, by taking the time to let me come to you, by not demanding that I open up on your schedule, by not insisting that I go inpatient when I finally let you see how I was suffering, you became someone who I am now able to use as an example.

A measurement, so to speak. Or you could call it scaffolding. Like when a fetus is in utero and there isn't a brain yet, but there is scaffolding for where the brain will go.

So when people became hostile or passive aggressive, I was able to compare their behaviors, their intentions, to yours.

In conflict, I can now take a step back and examine the conflict, instead of panicking and expecting punishment for the conflict existing.

I can look to see if the person treats conflict the way you and I do; by taking a pause, thinking about what you (or I) are seeking, clarifying our statements, then asking for feedback.

It's because of this that I no longer immediately panic about possibly being the reason they are upset.

I don't hold myself

accountable for their emotions anymore.

I don't feel I deserve to be punished for reasons that never made sense to me.

I don't hate myself because they had a bad day.

I don't want to die for failing at things that were never supposed to be my responsibility.

This isn't the full motivation behind my former suicide issues, but it's something I feel you don't know that you've done for me.

And it's something I'll never be caught dead saying out loud haha.

I want you to know, I *could not* have written this without you.

I mean that in more than one way.

I hope that in having read this book, you can see the influence you have had on my world.

Also, a special thank you being there for me during 2024.

And, uh... Thanks for not 51-50ing me, haha.

(a 51-50 is California for an involuntary 72 hour psychiatric hold)

No, you are not directly in my book lol.

You don't belong in hell.

To the Readers:

Writing this book was a kind of therapy for me.

I didn't, exactly, write this book for you? If anything, I kinda wrote this book for me.

Even so, I hope you enjoyed the books.

I needed an escape.

I hope this book provides an escape for those who need it, as well.

If you didn't enjoy the book. I understand.

Not everything is for everyone, and I hope you can find a world that you can dive into and let it consume you the way that telling this story was able to consume me.

2/1/2024 to 5/5/2025 I went through a medical crisis and almost died 6 times.

I had appendicitis 2/1/24, the antibiotics from that triggered an autoimmune condition, Warm Autoimmune Hemolytic Anemia, then the chemo used to treat the autoimmune condition triggered drug induced Lupus.

Warm Autoimmune Hemolytic Anemia (wAIHA) is a condition where the white blood cells attack and destroy red blood cells.

The incidence rate for that is '0.6-1.2 people per 100,000 people' (Bozzi et al., 2025), which translates to about a 0.000006-0.000012% rate of occurrence.

The chance to go into short term remission, was just under 20%, but I don't remember the source for that.

Long term remission didn't happen often enough that there were studies that gave percentages of occurrence (when searching in 2024).

I was sick, I couldn't walk across the room without my heart rate spiking over 160 and having difficulty

breathing.

I couldn't go outside, because Lupus.

My blood, heart and lungs were affected most.

I was admitted to the hospital with 1/3 of the blood of a normal person and did my finals from a hospital bed with roughly 1/2 of the blood of a normal person.

Life was uncertain, I didn't know if I would need chemo every 6 months for the rest of my life.

The chemo was Rituximab, once/week for 4 treatments at a time.

My second treatment was on my 32nd birthday.

Chemo *sucked*.

Literally **sucked.**

Like resting heart rate of 60 before chemo resting heart rate of 110 after chemo.

Sit in a chair and struggle to breathe for 8 hours at a time sucked. (Rituximab causes a synthetic allergic reaction)

Long term damage to the lungs sucked.

Thank **FUCK** I only needed one round!! (4 treatments)

The night of 1/5/2025 I had the dream for this book.

I know the date because I woke up and posted a TikTok about it, because I thought it was a cool idea.

But then… I COULDN'T let it go.

The worm had fully settled into my brain.

Especially when I needed an escape from being locked inside the same… damn… walls.

For 16 months *straight*.

Yeah I didn't handle that part well lol.

3/18/2025 I started writing.

Once I started writing (I was still sick) I finished the first book in under two months.

3/18/2025 to 5/15/2025.

4/7/25 I was declared to be in long term remission for wAIHA and I continue to test negative for wAIHA.

I was tested again for Lupus on 5/3/25, and 5/5/25 I got a clean bill of health.

Drug induced Lupus can disappear about one year after the drug that caused it is removed.

Thank fuckity fuck.

I would like to point out; my favorite number has always been 5.

I finished the rough draft of the first book on 5/15/2025.

Then, amazingly, I started my career on 5/27/2025.

I got to start going outside again.

I also got a lot more busy.

I continued to attend for my masters, to go to work, and try to recover from 16 months of not being able to work.

I finished the rough draft of book 2 on 10/4/2025.

I finished the rough draft of book 3 on 10/11/2025.

I had spent a lot of time from May to September organizing, bullet point scripting and fleshing out my thoughts.

I was able to finish editing enough to submit to copyright on 12/6/25.

This was fun.

10/10

Exactly what I needed.

I don't plan to do this again.

Unless I like, almost die again, I guess haha.

Dear god let that age well lol.

... I *do* still keep thinking about Ma, Reborn. Life in the Fog... though...